

The Work of Emancipation, the Emancipation of Work

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation  
*with research distinction in Philosophy* in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State  
University

by

Anh Ho

The Ohio State University

April 2016

Project Advisor: Professor Tamar Rudavsky, Department of Philosophy

Secondary Advisor: Christopher Brown, Department of Classics

## **Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 1: The Lesson of Dependency .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Separation Perfected .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Infinity and Patience .....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>136</b>

### **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to acknowledge all three members of my Committee. I would like to thank Professor Tamar Rudavsky for putting your care and trust in my project despite all of its unpredictable changes and initial lack of direction. My sincere respect goes to Professor Joel Wainwright for being the critical voice that is always insightful and constructive but never condemning. But, most of all, I would like to give all my thanks and appreciation to Christopher Brown not only for all of your technical but also philosophical and moral assistance. You are truly a mentor not only in your words but also in your actions.

Second, I would like to acknowledge all the members in the Working Group for pulling me away from the world of abstractions and into the real world of existence through friendships and community.

Finally, from my family, I would like to acknowledge my mother. Although you did not teach me a single thing about philosophy, you have shown me the way to live consciously and what it means to be genuinely human. Thank you for being the foundation and inspiration of everything I do.

## **Introduction**

*Through work, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is.*  
(Phenomenology, Page 118, Par.195)

In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes compares philosophical method to building a house. For him, it is important to begin philosophical inquiry anew; he tries “to try to reform my own thoughts and to build upon a foundation which is completely my own.”<sup>1</sup> Like building a new house, the first step is to completely remove the foundations of the old house and replace it with something stronger and sturdier that can support grander structures. This is especially important for philosophy since, as Descartes says, the principles of other sciences “must all be borrowed from philosophy;”<sup>2</sup> the foundations of philosophy cannot be put together carelessly if it is to be the foundation of all knowledge. The task of philosophy is to provide a method of reasoning that is both simple and rigorous, a method that will develop the capacity for reasoning to its fullest extent. To successfully employ the Cartesian method is to be cautious and wary of things we take for granted.

*The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not know evidently to be so; that is, carefully to avoid precipitous judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind with such clarity and distinctness that I would have no occasion to put it in doubt.*<sup>3</sup>

Hence, the problem that Descartes sees not just in philosophy but for all human beings who have the capacity for reasoning is that we readily accept opinions and ready-made judgements as truths without making the effort to examine their foundations. Old methods of reasoning are to be replaced by a new method that is free from defects: the Cartesian method assumes that error derives from what came before; the solution is to find something new.

---

<sup>1</sup> Descartes, R. and Cress, D. A. (1993) *Discourse on method ; and, meditations on first philosophy*. 3rd edn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11.

Although Descartes recognizes that universal doubt could lead to madness—he accepts that social life depends on traditions, the laws of the land, and the wisdom of the past—philosophy depends on freeing oneself from their influence. “I learned to believe nothing very firmly concerning what I had been persuaded to believe only by example and custom; and thus gradually freed myself from many errors that can darken our natural light and render us less able to listen to reason”<sup>4</sup>. Thus the philosopher stands outside the confines and limitations of his experience and exercises reason to arrive at truth.

The philosophers who are central to this paper—Marx, Hegel, Buddha and Laozi—see things very differently from Descartes. For these thinkers, Cartesian abstraction is an impossibility. Where Descartes imagines we can abstract ourselves from the influence of the past and external circumstances, they understand that philosophy begins with the recognition that we are conditioned beings. The problem for philosophical inquiry is not so much that people fail to think for themselves and thus to escape the influence of their circumstances. The problem, for these thinkers, is that people tend to forget that they are part of a larger picture of interconnections and mutual interactions. As Marx puts it in *Grundrisse*, “The more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole.”<sup>5</sup> That dependency is not merely social in the sense that individuals just happen to live and interact with one another. Descartes' abstraction from his social and material existence—“I could freely undertake to rid myself of them”<sup>6</sup>—is misguided. Understanding dependency correctly is to see it is a process of mutual conditioning, struggle, and transformation involving all parts of the whole. Hence Marx's sardonic jibe, “The

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Marx, K. and Nicolaus, M. (1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. New York: New York, Vintage Books [1973], 84.

<sup>6</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 16.

whole profundity of those modern economists...lies in this *forgetting*.”<sup>7</sup> For both Marx and Hegel the fundamental predicament of consciousness is to forget that it is conditioned and dependent. “The consciousness which is this truth has this path behind it and has *forgotten* it...merely asserts that it is all reality, but does not itself comprehend this.”<sup>8</sup> This arrogance and false consciousness keep philosophers from arriving at the truth.

Eastern philosophers like Laozi also reveal the interconnectedness of all things.

*The great Tao floods over,  
To the left, to the right.  
Ten thousand beings live by it,  
And it does not reject them.*<sup>9</sup>

He also warns about the dangers of forgetting this interconnectedness between individuals with each other, with nature, and with the greater whole.

*Not knowing the Everlasting  
One commits evils wantonly.*<sup>10</sup>

If the problem for philosophical inquiry is not improper reasoning but the tendency to forget, then the task of philosophers is not merely to propound methods and systems. The role of the philosopher is not to lead individuals down an unfamiliar path that will get them to the final destination that is truth. Instead, the task of the philosopher is precisely to help individuals recall the path that they are already walking on, “Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, philosophers help individuals to cultivate their historical or dialectical consciousness. It is not the case that truth stands outside reason but reason already

---

<sup>7</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., Miller, A. V. and Findlay, J. N. (1979) *Phenomenology of Spirit (Galaxy Books)*. 1st edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 141.

<sup>9</sup> Chen, E. M., zi, L., Tzu, L., Lao-Tzu, E. C. M., Laozi, L. Z. and Laozi (1989) *The Tao Te Ching: A New Translation With Commentary*. 1st edn. New York: Paragon House Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 493.

stands within truth. Framing philosophical inquiry as a process of remembrance might make the task seem an easy one. Historical consciousness would entail recalling the past like remembering yesterday's weather. But this would be too easy; not merely a mental action is required, but an act of self-abnegation. Historical consciousness can only arise from the recognition that individuals are conditioned and dependent. The acknowledgement of dependency is contrary to the desire of the self to be all reality, "an existence on its own and a separate freedom."<sup>12</sup> Our reality is a shared reality, the sphere of life where "the passive separatedness of the shapes...collapse into one another."<sup>13</sup> Hegel calls the path towards historical consciousness a path of despair. It is despair not because individuality is lost; dependency or conditionality does not mean that everything is reduced to homogeneity without identity. It is not to say abstractly that the world is the same as me and I am the same as the world. What it does mean is that individuals are in constant relationship with one another. Those interactions are not always positive; they can also be negative in the sense that they contradict what individuals want and desire. But, since individuals are dependent and conditioned beings, the solution is not finding a mean to escape; there is no escape. Rather, it is a confrontation without "turning away and pass(ing) on to something else."<sup>14</sup>

*It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative...on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it<sup>15</sup>*

While the recognition of dependence might seem like a rejection of individuality, it actually leads to a better understanding of individuality in comparison to the crude individualism that came before historical consciousness. "It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 19.

finds itself.”<sup>16</sup> The effort of an individual striving towards historical consciousness is not merely the use of mental energy to recall the past; it demands the courage to see the neglected truth that was already there. It takes more than just wit and intelligence. It takes work. This work is the subject of this paper.

No one doubts the importance of work in daily life. Work is basic to our perceptions of the world, especially these days. A worker is described as “making a living”—work is a livelihood, a place on the job market, “He works in order to live.”<sup>17</sup> Whatever one's opinions about justice and other ideals, work, understood as wage labor, is an inevitable part of life. For most students, prospects of work guide their choice of studies. However unexamined, work may be the most important concept for us. It gives meaning to otherwise aimless activities and provides structure to our lives. If work already holds such a great importance for us and society as a whole, then why does it require philosophical discussion? Because the understanding of work in contemporary society is poles apart from the understanding of work developed above. Wage labor differs from the work of historical consciousness.

Hegel's famous aphorism holds that owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk. Philosophy engages with what is already being lost. When philosophers speak of the things that are dear to them, it means that those things are no longer dear to others. The concept of work, as developed by Hegel, Marx, Buddha, and Laozi seems in danger of eclipse. It may be argued that work is dead, and that its corpse is on display. Politicians talk about making jobs and raising employment. People crave a career as though that were the path to a working life, not understanding that we have access to work at every moment. The purpose of this paper is not to fetishize work, but to develop a coherent understanding as the basis for a lifetime of work. At least this may keep us

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Tucker, R. C. (1978) *Tucker Marx-Engels reader 2ed (cloth)*. 2nd edn. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 204.



from imagining that we are working when we are not. As Hegel says, there are ways “of creating an impression of hard work and serious commitment to the problem, while actually sparing oneself both.”<sup>18</sup>

Since the emergence of work as wage labor is a defining characteristic of capitalism, the analysis of capitalism will be central to this paper. For Marx capitalism represents a sphere of non-historical consciousness. As formulated by classical economists such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo, capitalism is a force of progress that operates by its own laws and leads, as Fukuyama puts it, to the end of history, which amounts to the perpetuation of political economy; nothing comes after capitalism. This corresponds to what Hegel calls the bad infinity, an infinite repetition of the same.

In Marx's terms, capitalism is simply a society of individuals devoid of historical consciousness, hence it is a system of relations. For Marx most “economists are misled by the fetishism attached to the world of commodities.”<sup>19</sup> They imagine capitalism as a system for the production of commodities, without analyzing the system of relations intrinsic in the commodity form. They imagine a world of things endowed with a kind of mystical power and obeying their own laws; the task of the modern economist becomes examination of these laws. The result is a mystification of capitalism.

Talk of work as the effort towards historical consciousness, as the acknowledgment of dependency, might lead to a self-defeating attitude—individuals might appear helpless under the weight of their conditions. But dependency goes both ways. Our conditions change in accordance with how we live and behave. The most famous of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* holds that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to

---

<sup>18</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Marx, K., Mandel, E. and Fowkes, B. (1990) *Capital: A critique of political economy: V. 1: A critique of political economy*. New York, NY: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review., 176.

change it.”<sup>20</sup> Many have taken this quote to heart, but perhaps it has been misunderstood. As Marx stated in his essay on Estranged Labour, “The only wheels which political economy sets in motion are *greed*, and the *war amongst the greedy – competition*.” If we see the world as a battlefield between people it is because people are overcome by greed. We forget that the state of the world depends on the state of individuals. The world is not a figment of our consciousness, but it does faithfully reflect it. If we immerse ourselves in changing our surroundings, we might ignore the root of the problem, and the old patterns will repeat themselves.

Therefore, yes, the point is to change the world. However, to change the world is to change ourselves. Through self-mastery we may achieve a higher level of self-consciousness; that is the ultimate goal of work. This work at first seems like an upward motion: we start out empty-handed and expect to get something, like a mysterious hidden prize, at the end of the road. But through this work we discover ourselves. As Hegel puts it, the movement of the journey is “something that recollects itself, whose existence is self-knowledge, and whose self-knowledge is just as immediately existence.”<sup>21</sup>

Work must be understood concretely and not just abstractly. If we take the notion of work away from the sensible manner in which we imagine it—the image of the farmer toiling the field, the mechanic fixing machines, the sculptor chiseling his masterpiece— then we fail to see that work is only comprehensible when situated within a certain space and time, as part of history. As Marx says, when dealing with work, “we are dealing with a specific epoch e.g. modern bourgeois production,”<sup>22</sup> with its own themes and characteristics. The broader our conception of work, the more we risk abstracting from its historical form. Each form of work, whether of the

---

<sup>20</sup> Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1986) *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected works: [their essential thinking in philosophy, political economy, history, social change and communism]*. New York: International Publishers Co.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 85.

farmer, mechanic, or television personality, is a product of specific period of history, and each worker at each moment of history participates in the greater whole in different ways. A farmer today has a very different place in the world than farmers did in antiquity or even a hundred years ago. Where the capitalist system sees wage labor as interchangeable, for individuals each person's work is different from everyone else's. If we understand work as a struggle, then every struggle is different and can only be understood by an individual in a specific situation. In other words, only I can comprehend my own situation and understand what I must do. No one else can do my work; one is "not to give oneself over the thoughts of others, upon mere authority, but to examine everything for oneself and follow one's own conviction."<sup>23</sup> This is not a call for arbitrary freedom, but a reminder that one must take responsibility for oneself even within a larger group.

Neither should we look at work as separate and unrelated physical activities. To do so would be to overlook that "There are characteristics which all stages of production have in have in common."<sup>24</sup> The productive forces in history are always in movement. To see work as a general principle is to recognize in work the common ground that ties different historical periods together; it is to see work not merely as an activity but as integral to the development of history and consciousness. Work is not just an activity amongst other activities. Work is an important component not only for understanding reality; "work forms and shapes the thing."<sup>25</sup> In other words, work is the actualization of reality.

Thus work is first of all a principle of actualization. The formation of cultures, nationalities, etc. are themselves products of historical circumstances, outcomes of work. Secondly, work is the principle that allows for the transitions between different phases of history

---

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118.

or consciousness. The moment of work is a moment of disruption. “Work... is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off.”<sup>26</sup> Hence, work is a synthesis of an aspiration for change and the actualization of that aspiration.

We are still left with the question, how to work? In contemporary society, the worker's predicament seems hopeless:

*Workers do not produce themselves, they produce a power independent of themselves....As their alienated products accumulate, all time and space become foreign to them.*<sup>27</sup>

When this level of awareness is reached, typical reactions are agitation or desperation. In agitation one feels like one must do something, otherwise everything is wasted. Desperation whispers that one cannot do anything. One experiences “the feeling of profound dejection as well as of extreme rebellion.”<sup>28</sup> One feels wronged by an overpowering external force. Threatened, the next step is to seek out the source of one's problem and annihilate it—a militant reaction. Capitalism is the enemy.

Such militancy risks reifying capitalism as an eternal and unchanging socioeconomic relation, as political economy does; it might overlook that capitalism itself is a contradiction in movement. Marxism demanded that workers rise and overthrow the established power in order to reclaim the means of production; controlling the means of production, the workers could now work free from the domination of the bourgeoisie. In so doing, the revolutionaries impute to capitalism more power than it actually has. They would avoid commodity fetishism by fetishizing their enemy. When we identify ourselves as exploited, we risk further exploitation at our own hands. We might suffocate from our own hands around our throats. For the work of

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>27</sup> Debord, G. (2013) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Edited by Ken Knabb. United States: Bureau of Public Secrets, U.S., 11.

<sup>28</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 314.

consciousness is always possible. Nothing prevents us from work. As Debord argues, it is characteristic of our contemporary society of the spectacle that we have removed ourselves from work.

*Due to the very success of this separate production of separation, the fundamental experience that in earlier societies was associated with people's primary work is in the process of being replaced (in sectors near the cutting edge of the system's evolution) by an identification of life with nonworking.<sup>29</sup>*

For Debord, the opposite of the spectacle is dialogue. What is needed at the moment is not another revolution fueled by agitation and desperation, but an openness to dialogue. But genuine dialogue is only possible when one is conscious of oneself, one's behavior and intentions. This, I argue in this paper, is what Hegel and philosophers like him considered work. Even though it sounds intimidating, it is simply a process of being honest and coming to terms with oneself.

Study of Eastern philosophy can help in this endeavor, for Eastern traditions have cultivated the practice of self-reflection in a manner that is not necessarily analytical but primarily spiritual [*geistig*].

*What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is — this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'.<sup>30</sup>*

It offers a perspective of totality—not looking at ourselves in parts, like a biologist examining a specimen. Daoist and Buddhist sources see work as non-action; work is something that should not and cannot be rushed. Patience is required to prepare for the right time when one can make a difference.

*Therefore the sage says:  
I do not act;*

---

<sup>29</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 27.

<sup>30</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 110.

*Hence the people transform by themselves;*<sup>31</sup>

Or, in Debord's words:

*By rushing into sordid reformist compromises or pseudo-revolutionary collective actions, those driven by abstract desire for immediate effectiveness are in reality obeying the ruling laws of thought, adopting a perspective that can see nothing but the latest news....A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.*<sup>32</sup>

To recognize that we already possess the answers to our problems, if we are ready to work towards them, would already be a step towards change.

---

<sup>31</sup> Chen, Tao Te Ching, 190.

<sup>32</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 220.

## **Chapter 1: The Lesson of Dependency**

*Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another.*  
(Phenomenology, Page 111, Par. 178)

The Buddha's enlightenment under the bodhi tree is described as the revelation of dependent origination—the mutual causation of all things.

*At that time the Lord sat cross-legged for seven days experiencing the bliss of liberation. Then, at the end of those seven days, the Lord emerged from that concentration and gave well-reasoned attention during the first watch of the night to dependent arising in forward order, thus:*

*This being, that is;  
from the arising of this, that arises.*<sup>33</sup>

Then Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant, exclaims that he now understands dependent origination completely:

*It is wonderful, Lord, it is marvelous how profound this dependent origination is, and how profound it appears! And yet it appears to me as clear as clear!*<sup>34</sup>

The Buddha quickly rebukes him:

*Do not say that, Ananda, do not say that! This dependent origination is profound and appears profound. It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin and round of birth-and-death.*<sup>35</sup>

The truth of dependent origination is simple in its formulation of "This being, that is."

We can also find another teaching in the same vein as dependent origination in the *Tao Te Ching*.

*When all under heaven know beauty as beauty,  
There is then ugliness;*

<sup>33</sup> "Bodhi Sutta: The Bodhi Tree (1)" (Ud 1.1), translated from the Pali by John D. Ireland. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 8 July 2010, <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.01.irel.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Walshe, M. (1995) *The long discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Digha Nikaya (teachings of the Buddha)*. 2nd edn. Boston: Wisdom Publications, U.S., 223.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 223.

*When all know the good (as) good;  
There is then the not good.*

*Therefore being and non-being, give rise to each other,  
The difficult and easy complement each other,  
The long and short shape each other,  
The high and low lean on each other,  
Voices and instruments harmonize with one another,  
The front and rear follow upon one another.<sup>36</sup>*

The simplicity of appearances is deceiving; what appears may seem easy to understand, but only because our consciousness tends to simplify reality. Though we may think we understand the concept of dependent origination—the interrelation of all things—we still tend to see things as separate entities. Reality appears to us as a series of events, one following the other. We often see the whole of reality as continuous like a long chain and its parts as smaller links that connect with one another. Yet, we suppose that if we were to remove one of the links from this long chain, the link could exist on its own apart from the chain and the chain would continue to exist even with one of the links missing. The chain and the links, the whole and its parts appear as two separate entities with inherent and independent existences.

Marx sees his contemporaries, the political economists, making the same mistake by imagining the relationship between individuals and society as mutually independent, which amounts to “the re-establishing of “Society” as an abstraction vis-à-vis the individual.”<sup>37</sup> The political economists imagine society as something separate from the life of the individual. The political economists have in their possession a comprehensive system of society, of “capital and land, and of wages, profit of capital and rent of land—likewise division of labor, competition, the

---

<sup>36</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 86.



concept of exchange-value, etc.,”<sup>38</sup> from which they deduce a system of laws. This vision of political economy as something autonomous corresponds to a vision of the autonomous individual. They cannot let go of the fantasy of Robin Crusoe, “The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman” and the dream of “a return to a misunderstood natural life.”<sup>39</sup> In reply, Marx goes so far as to say that to imagine individuals as separate from society “is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living *together* and talking to each other.”<sup>40</sup>

Just as the Buddha cautions that it is hard to grasp the truth of dependent origination, so Debord warns against imagining the independence of things. This process “which seems at first glance so trivial and obvious... is actually so complex and full of metaphysical subtleties.”<sup>41</sup> It might seem harmless to hold the view that things exist independently, but that is the heart of the problem. “Whenever *representation* becomes independent, the spectacle regenerates itself.”<sup>42</sup> This autonomy of representation is deeply rooted in the western tradition. “The spectacle inherits the weakness of the Western philosophical project, which attempted to understand activity by means of the categories of vision, and it is based on the relentless development of the particular technical rationality that grew out of that form of thought.”<sup>43</sup>

To hold the view that objects (things and people) are inherently independent is not merely to commodify the whole of our experience, a tendency specific to capitalism. It implies an ancient and deep-seated tendency to distort reality. In other words, to see all representations as independent rather than dependent is a trait exemplified by but long predating capitalism. “The

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, *The Grundrisse*, 83.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 35.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 6.

root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power. The spectacle plays the specialized role of speaking in the name of all the other activities. It is hierarchical society's ambassador to itself, delivering its messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak. The most modern aspect of the spectacle is thus also the most archaic."<sup>44</sup>

Thus the view of political economy that individuals and things exist independently from one another is not only motivated by theoretical reasons, or merely by the wish to give a descriptive account of reality. It is not just the political economists who cling to the image of Robinson Crusoe. We, as individuals, implicitly long for the same existence. We want to be independent and free from unwanted influences. We are driven by desire. "We desire to observe the manifestations."<sup>45</sup> In other words, as individuals we desire to see things as separate and independent, reflecting our own desire for absolute individuality. As Hegel says in the *Phenomenology*, "Self-consciousness which is simply for itself..., or is primarily *desire*, will... learn through experience that the object is independent."<sup>46</sup>

Where does this desire come from? First, there is a desire for independence because consciousness learns from experience that it is different from the objects within its environment. In the process of interacting with things, the individual realizes that there is something distinctive about the object: "it is a being that is reflected into itself, and the object of immediate desire is a *living thing*."<sup>47</sup>

Second, consciousness reflects this realization back on itself. It becomes self-consciousness. Consciousness learns that, since what gives the object existence is its independence, to have existence is precisely to be independent. Without this independence,

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 51.

<sup>46</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 106.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 106.

consciousness thinks that it will be at risk of being “dissolved in this universal element”<sup>48</sup> or becoming a thing amongst things. In response, consciousness “preserves itself by separating itself”<sup>49</sup> from objects, creating a division between it and things. This independent existence is what consciousness deems the self: “Opposed to an other, the ‘I’ is its own self.”<sup>50</sup> Division or separation is the origin of individuality; “this dividedness of the differenceless fluid medium is just what establishes individuality.”<sup>51</sup> This eventually leads to a developed sense of self and in that way consciousness becomes self-consciousness.

*There being 'I am,' there comes to be 'I am here,' there comes to be 'I am like this' ... 'I am otherwise' ... 'I am bad' ... 'I am good' ... 'I might be' ... 'I might be here' ... 'I might be like this' ... 'I might be otherwise' ... 'May I be' ... 'May I be here' ... 'May I be like this' ... 'May I be otherwise' ... 'I will be' ... 'I will be here' ... 'I will be like this' ... 'I will be otherwise.’*<sup>52</sup>

This separation extends beyond the relation between individuals and things to the relation between individuals and individuals. The individual sees himself and the other as separate. “If a man is confronted... he is confronted by the *other* man”<sup>53</sup> who is seen as an image that is “equally independent and self-contained, and there is nothing in it of which it is not itself the origin.”<sup>54</sup> When both sides are established as independent from one another, whether as individuals and things or as individuals and individuals, the relation is alienating. Not only are things and other individuals external to the person himself but, collectively, they become “a power of its own confronting him... as something hostile and alien.”<sup>55</sup> A thing with no

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>52</sup> “Tanha Sutta: Craving” (AN 4.199), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.199.than.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 77.

<sup>54</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.

<sup>55</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 72.

independent power now “operates on him as an alien, divine, or diabolical activity;”<sup>56</sup> other people are now his masters and his enemies. This reinforces the existing alienation. In Marxian terms, “The relationship of the worker to labor engenders the relation to it of the capitalist, or whatever one chooses to call the master of labor.”<sup>57</sup> This notion of absolute individuality and independence, instead of providing consciousness with confidence and assurance, actually casts consciousness towards “the pathway of *doubt*, or more precisely... the way of despair.”<sup>58</sup>

By making itself as inherently real and independent as the absolute individual, “the beyond is established for consciousness.”<sup>59</sup> The other is felt as outside the grasp of self-consciousness and it “feels this violence and anxiety.”<sup>60</sup> This anxiety, caused by the belief that one is inherently independent, as alienation, is the cause of desire. Desire can only occur if there is division or separation and it manifests as “the *supersession* of all distinctions.”<sup>61</sup> Because things and others are determined as independent apart from the self, the only way that one interacts with them is through desire; therefore, “self-consciousness is *Desire* in general.”<sup>62</sup> Self-consciousness creates a division between itself, as a self, and everything else, including other people—this alienation can only be compensated by desire. Desire must emerge, so that it “overarches this other.”<sup>63</sup> Desire and alienation go hand in hand; they cannot be separated. So when interacting with something or someone, self-consciousness cannot just relate to the object in an ordinary manner. Self-consciousness must take hold of the object. “When consciousness

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>58</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 104.

feels this violence, its anxiety may well make it retreat from the truth, and strive to hold on to what it is in danger of losing.”<sup>64</sup> The Buddha also speaks about the inclination to desire.

*And what, bhikkhus, are the things that can be clung to, and what is clinging? Form, bhikkhus, is a thing that can be clung to, the desire and lust for it is the clinging there. Feeling...Perception...Volitional formations...Consciousness is a thing that can be clung to; the desire and lust for it is the clinging there. These are called the things that can be clung to, and this the clinging.*<sup>65</sup>

What happens when one desires? The first moment of desire is transgression. Consciousness, by its nature, wants to overcome its alienation. By its identification with desire, consciousness tries to overcome alienation by overstepping its bounds and the other's bounds through acts of subjugation or domination. This appears in the *Phenomenology* as the struggle of the lord and the bondsman: “he [the lord]...is the power over the other [the bondsman], it follows that he holds the other in subjection.”<sup>66</sup> It is the power and the desire of the lord to negate, subdue, and ultimately to hate others.

We might compare the story in the *Digha Nikaya* of a prince who kills his father in order to claim kingship.

*Transgression overcame me, Lord, foolish, erring and wicked as I was, in that for the throne deprived my father, that good man and just king, of his life.*<sup>67</sup>

These are extreme examples, but transgression happens in every moment of our lives. It occurs even in an ordinary activity like eating.

*At Savatthi. Now on that occasion King Pasenadi of Kosala had eaten a bucket measure of rice and curries. Then, while still full, huffing and puffing, the king approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him and, and sat down to one side.*

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Bodhi, B. (2000) *Connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, U.S.

<sup>66</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 115.

<sup>67</sup> Walshe, *Digha Nikaya*, 108.

*Then the Blessed One, having understood that King Pasenadi was full and was huffing and puffing, on that occasion recited this verse:*

*“When a man is always mindful,  
Knowing moderation in the food he eats,  
His ailments then diminish:  
He ages slowly, guarding his life.”<sup>68</sup>*

When determining if natural consciousness is transgressing, it is important not to base our judgments solely on a specific example of transgression. Rather, we have to look at the relation between consciousness and its objects. Then certain subtleties become apparent. Even though killing and eating are two different activities, they both can represent moments of transgression for consciousness. In the act of killing, in relation to his father, the consciousness of the prince knows nothing else but the negation of the object which is the king. The same goes for the person who overeats. His mind is totally engrossed in the moment of consumption and knows nothing but the desire to consume everything in sight. Transgression appears in endless numbers of ways and we cannot identify it by just looking at one specific instance (killing but not eating) and from one side (strictly objective or subjective). In any case, we always have to look at how they relate. Transgression manifests in every excessive action or behavior; it is also apparent in the lord’s fixated enjoyment of the bondsman’s work. “For the lord...the *immediate* relation becomes...the enjoyment of it.”<sup>69</sup>

The second moment of desire is possession, “the sensuous appropriation for and by man of the human essence and human life...in the sense of *possessing*, of *having*.”<sup>70</sup> Accumulation becomes the goal, consciousness must take ownership of the other. “When at the same time the

---

<sup>68</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 176.

<sup>69</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116.

<sup>70</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Private Property and Communism”, 87.

thing is taken up into my will, possession becomes *ownership*.<sup>71</sup> The point is to make the other mine. “Through possession, on the one hand, *I come external*; and, on the other hand (which amounts to the same thing), an external thing becomes *mine*.<sup>72</sup> This moment is the opposite of transgression, where consciousness tries to negate its opposite. With possession, consciousness tries to maintain its object as long as possible. In “Lordship and Bondage,” even though the lord, through a life-and-death struggle, dominates the bondsman, the lord “cannot go the length being altogether done with it (the bondsman) to the point of annihilation.”<sup>73</sup> Formerly, consciousness wanted to master its object, but consciousness is now at its mercy. One moment consciousness was indulging to the point of excess. The next moment, when consciousness possesses, even the most basic activity such as consumption for the sake of sustenance is neglected, not to mention higher needs. “The less you eat, drink, and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public-house...the more you *save* – the *greater* becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour – your *capital*.<sup>74</sup> Since consciousness refuses to consume or annihilate its objects, the tendency is to accumulate. Greed takes over. “Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed.”<sup>75</sup>

The *Tao Te Ching* also speaks to our tendency for greed.

*Among offenses, none is greater than having what is desirable.  
Among calamities, none is greater than not knowing contentment.  
Among blame, none is greater than the desire for gain.*<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Hegel, G.W.F., Wannenmann, P., Hodgson, P.C., the staff of the Hegel Archives, with an introduction by Otto Pöggeler and translated by J. Michael Stewart (1996) *Lectures on natural right and political science: The First philosophy of right*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 72.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>73</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116.

<sup>74</sup> Tucker, Marx-Engels Reader, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 95.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, “Private Property and Communism”, 87.

<sup>76</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 165.

Laozi warns about greed not only because greed is dangerous in and of itself but also because of where greed can lead us. Possession of the object of desire is dangerous: not only is there no room for contentment if our goal in life is to accumulate but, since it is a moment of the dialectic, it leads consciousness back to the previous moment of transgression—of needless negation and hate and also a return to alienation. For that reason, there is no end to possession and accumulation. The last moment of possession is only the beginning of a new cycle of alienation.

In summary, alienation and desire and, within desire itself, transgression and possession, are at their peak and epitomized in self-consciousness. Alienation reaches its highest point when consciousness recognizes in the object or in another individual the characteristic of otherness and within itself the characteristic of selfhood. Since self, objects, and individuals are alienated from each other, desire is the way they connect to one another when alienation is at its highest point. When desire is at its highest point, the climax of transgression and possession also occurs. Self-consciousness transgresses through the act of seeking “the death of the other.”<sup>77</sup>

In the Buddhist context, this is hatred. When hatred is at its peak what we have is the desire to annihilate the other.

*The Blessed One said this: "Here, student, some man or woman kills living beings and is murderous, bloody-handed, given to blows and violence, merciless to living beings."*<sup>78</sup>

And in the *Tao Te Ching* we have war.

*One who assists the ruler with Tao,  
Does not overpower the world by military conquests.*<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 113.

<sup>78</sup> Pail, the, Ñāṇamoli, B., Bodhi, B., Bhikkhu, B. and Nanamoli, B. (1995) *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Majjhima Nikaya (teachings of the Buddha)*. 2nd edn. Boston: Wisdom Publications in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 1053.

<sup>79</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 128.



With the desire for possession, self-consciousness wants to subjugate the other, not only owning the thing but owning the other as a bondsman or a slave, reducing the other consciousness to “the form of *thinghood*.”<sup>80</sup> In Buddhism, there is greed: “covetousness and unrighteous greed is an imperfection that defiles the mind.”<sup>81</sup> This corresponds to the comments from the *Tao Te Ching* on greed and accumulation cited above.

Alienation, desire, transgression and possession are all components of political economy, but they can only be understood by understanding their origin. They all emerge from the view that things and individuals have inherent independent selves, separate from one another—the view that every single thing has autonomous being. “In the same way, any action performed with greed... performed with aversion... performed with delusion — born of delusion, caused by delusion, originating from delusion: wherever one's selfhood turns up, there that action will ripen.”<sup>82</sup>

Nonetheless, if we further conceive the two moments of alienation and desire as independent and separate while having inherent existence, as though one could desire without being alienated and be alienated without desiring, then the result is that one moment contradicts the other. Such is the case for wage labor: when the wage laborer produces he is producing something outside himself. “The product of his activity is not the object of his activity,”<sup>83</sup> since he works for money. The activity of labor is a moment of alienation. But the laborer “does not even reckon labor as part of his life.”<sup>84</sup> His life begins when laboring ends: “life begins for him

---

<sup>80</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 115.

<sup>81</sup> Pali, *Majjhima Nikaya*, 118.

<sup>82</sup> “Nidana Sutta: Causes” (AN 3.33), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.033.than.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 205.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 204.

where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed.”<sup>85</sup> These places are the domain of the laborer’s desire. He imagines his life of alienated labor as separate from his desires; yet he engages in alienated labor only in order to gratify his desires. The laborer does not see this connection; neither does political economy. The division between the life of alienated labor and the life of isolated desire is so great that, as Marx says, “If the silk worm were to spin in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage-worker.”<sup>86</sup>

Since alienation and desire constitute the same movement, the contradiction between them is an internal contradiction. Hence the movement of political economy and the movement of desire always appear contradictory.

*The growing incompatibility between the productive development of society and its hitherto existing relations of production expresses itself in bitter contradictions, crises and spasms. The violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation, is the most striking form in which advice is given it to be gone and to give room to a higher state of social production.*<sup>87</sup>

We run into contradictions at every turn. On the larger level of political economy, we have alienation and desire. Because of their different features, alienation (as the condition in which everything is divided), and desire (as the irresistible impulse to reunite distinctions), oppose each other. “The two Forces thus consist in their being determined as mutually opposed.”<sup>88</sup> Since alienation and desire are the underlying motors of political economy, political economy exemplifies the contradiction between alienation and desire.

On the one hand, political economy expresses the repulsion and irreconcilability of alienation. “The laws of political economy express the estrangement of the worker in his

---

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>87</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 750..

<sup>88</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 84.

object.”<sup>89</sup> At the same time, political economy also shows that attempts to unify these differences by aligning and identifying with desire reduce every relation to capitalistic relations.

*We have already seen how the political economist establishes the unity of labor and capital in a variety of ways: — (1) Capital is accumulated labor. (2) The purpose of capital within production – partly, reproduction of capital with profit, partly, capital as raw material (material of labor), and partly, as itself a working instrument (the machine is capital directly equated with labor) – is productive labor. (3) The worker is a capital. (4) Wages belong to costs of capital. (5) In relation to the worker, labor is the reproduction of life-capital. (6) In relation to the capitalist, labor is an aspect of his capital’s activity.*

*Finally, (7) the political economist postulates the original unity of capital and labor in the form of the unity of the capitalist and the worker; this is the original state of paradise.*<sup>90</sup>

In the end, we are all capitalists, “Society is then conceived as an abstract capitalist.”<sup>91</sup>

Because political economy expresses both alienation and desire, it culminates in a contradiction:

The more we desire or, in Marx’s term, the more value we seek, the more alienated we are.

*...the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the mightier labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more ingenious labor becomes, the duller becomes the worker.*<sup>92</sup>

More importantly, not only political economy, as a set of laws and an expression of reality, contains within itself an internal contradiction. The desirous individuals who operate within the system of political economy are also in contradiction with themselves. The Buddha speaks of the contradiction within the individual as following.

*“Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of wordlings, ignoble,*

<sup>89</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 73.

<sup>90</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 98.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 80.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 73.

*unbeneficial; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial.*”<sup>93</sup>

Transgression and possession appear contradictory and both of those moments reside within the individual who is craving or desiring. One spends extravagantly to the point of excess, supposing the life of gratification as fulfilling, as what gives meaning to one’s life.

*To fill the hall with gold and jade,  
There is no way to guard them.  
To be rich, exalted and proud,  
This is to invite blame upon oneself.*<sup>94</sup>

Yet, one pushes oneself to the point of deprivation and denies the most basic necessities for the sake of possession and accumulation. It is the path of “Self-denial, the denial of life and of all human needs.”<sup>95</sup> The more one accumulates the more one loses and one is willing to lose in order to accumulate more. Contradiction occurs from the highest all the way down to the lowest stratum.

However, as implied above, although alienation and desire are oppositional, they depend on each other: “division of labor and wealth of production, division of labor and accumulation of capital, are mutually interrelated.”<sup>96</sup> The contradiction is, in actuality, a mutual conditioning, “As positive and negative they stimulate each other into activity.”<sup>97</sup> Alienation and desire condition each other by the fact that each gives the other its existence—alienation exists with and because of desire, and vice versa. The same holds for the life of enjoyment and the life of thrift. One has to save and accumulate in order to enjoy, and enjoyment is what gives purpose to accumulation. People “forget that extravagance and thrift, luxury and privation, wealth and poverty are

---

<sup>93</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 1844.

<sup>94</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 77.

<sup>95</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Readers*, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 95.

<sup>96</sup> Marx, K., Milligan, M., Communist, the, Engels, F. and Rosenbaum, S. E. (1988) *The economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 and the communist manifesto (great books in philosophy)*. Edited by Robert M. Baird. United States: Prometheus Books., 132.

<sup>97</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 99.

equal.”<sup>98</sup> Not only can one side not completely annihilate its opposite, but each side mutually keeps the other alive and is responsible for the other. Ultimately, alienation and desire are two moments of the same movement. They go hand in hand. Hegel uses the magnet as an example of this unity of movement that contains an internal contradiction: “the north pole which is in the in-itself of the south pole is the north pole *actually present in the same magnet*.”<sup>99</sup> The repulsive and attractive force exist in the magnet as alienation and desire in political economy and self-consciousness. Alienation is pushing away, a repulsive force, “what is *selfsame repels* itself from itself.”<sup>100</sup> Desire is pulling in, an attractive force, “what is *not selfsame* is *self-attractive*.”<sup>101</sup> The same goes for transgression and possession, which are also just two moments constituting the movement that is desire. The former is the pushing aspect of the movement and the latter its pulling aspect, to use a bodily analogy.

Seeing alienation and desire as mutually dependent moments helps us to reconsider our normal tendency to see the movement of reality or history as a sequence of inherently independent events and entities “vying with each other and constantly replacing each other,”<sup>102</sup> forming a linear movement. An understanding of mutual dependency and conditioning shows that the movement is circular. “You must hold on to the *circular movement* sensuously perceptible in that progression, by which man repeats himself.”<sup>103</sup> That is not to say that every apparent repetition is identical to what comes before and after, since we cannot know exactly what came before and what might come after—we might lack necessary information. Historical

---

<sup>98</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Readers*, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 96.

<sup>99</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 98.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>102</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 25.

<sup>103</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Communism and Private Property”, 92.

consciousness is not about retaining complete information about the past and making perfect predictions about the future.

The *Tao Te Ching* warns against knowledge that is merely miscellaneous information:

*When intelligence and knowledge appear,  
There is great artificiality.*<sup>104</sup>

To understand historical consciousness as unrelated information about the past and future, without any bearing on our own lives, would be an artificial understanding of historical consciousness and history. History repeats itself through a dependent or dialectical movement; historical consciousness is the recognition of this movement. And with that understanding, at every stage, the individual is always in a position to learn the lesson of dependent origination and live accordingly.

*Therefore the sage embraces the One.  
He becomes the model of the world.*<sup>105</sup>

The individual always has access to this awareness of history. “The *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing...but the coming-to-be of nature for man, he has the visible proof...through himself, of his *process of coming-to-be*.”<sup>106</sup> Yet, that advantage could also be a disadvantage. What would otherwise bring “human emancipation and recovery”<sup>107</sup> could instead be viewed, rightly so, as *samsara*, a vicious cycle of unending suffering and eternal bondage with no means of escape.

*At Savatthi. “Bhikkhus, this samsara is without discoverable beginning. A first point is not discerned of beings roaming and wandering on hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving. What do you think, bhikkhus, which is more: the stream of tears that you have shed as you roamed and wandered on through this long course, weeping and wailing because of*

---

<sup>104</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 99.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>106</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Communism and Private Property”, 92.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, “Communism and Private Property”, 93.

*being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable—this or the water in the four great oceans?”*

*“As we understand the Dhamma taught by the blessed one, venerable sir, the stream of tears that we have shed as we roamed and wandered through this long course, weeping and wailing because of being united with the disagreeable and separated from the agreeable — this alone is more than the water in the four great oceans.”*<sup>108</sup>

At the core, it is the same dialectical movement consisting of dependent and interrelated parts. The difference lies in whether or not one is aware of and acknowledges this movement; this slight difference decides emancipation or suffering. To realize that life is suffering is not to hold an unfounded pessimism, but to recognize that living a life of desire and alienation while unconscious of their connection will always result in contradictions. Without dialectical understanding and awareness of dependency, life is an unending cycle of alienation and desire, of transgression and possession, of rising to the highest heights and falling to the lowest lows, and the desperate sense that there is nothing one can do about it. These patterns repeat themselves both in political economy and in the lives of individuals.

For this reason the most serious problems with political economy—from its beginnings in exchange to the advanced stage of spectacular society—are not its end-results (war, competition, exploitation, etc.), what Debord calls visible domination. The most serious problem with the capitalistic system is that it *“conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labor by not considering the direct relationship between the worker (labor) and production.”*<sup>109</sup> It is a system that is enmeshed in and embraces ignorance or, in Hegelian terminology, abstraction. It *“produces... idiocy, cretinism.”*<sup>110</sup>

Ignorance keeps the laborer trapped within political economy. The laborer does not see that the way to overcome political economy begins with understanding the nature of labor and

---

<sup>108</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 652.

<sup>109</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 73.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 73.

changing it, to the extent possible, from alienated to non-alienated labor. Instead the laborer may resort to ideology, religion, drugs or other forms of the spectacle to escape this reality; alternately he may follow a path of activism or even violence to change his predicament. The laborer, against the master of labor, embodies “the *negative* side of the antagonism, its disturbance within itself, private property abolished and in the process of abolishing itself.”<sup>111</sup> The laborer does not see the path towards his own freedom. Even were he to destroy the master of labor, his freedom will not be long lasting because as a fugitive he would have to guard his semblance of freedom.

On the other hand, the master of labor, out of self-interest, exploits the laborer. The master of labor is the opposite of the laborer. “This is the *positive* side of the antagonism, private property satisfied with itself.”<sup>112</sup> In terms of status, the laborer and the master of labor are different from one another but in their ignorance they are the same. “The possessing class and the proletarian class represent one and the same human self-alienation.”<sup>113</sup> But the master of labor, “feels satisfied and affirmed in this self-alienation, experiences the alienation as a sign *of its own power*, and possesses in it the *appearance* of a human existence.”<sup>114</sup> The master of labor, through his exploitation, invites his own demise at the hand of the laborer; furthermore he is unaware that he is leading “an inhuman existence.”<sup>115</sup> By denying the human nature of others, he acts in “blatant, outright and all-embracing denial”<sup>116</sup> of his own human nature. His exploitation is his ruin.

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 133.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 133.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 133.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 133.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 133.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 134.



Political economy is not an accident that befalls humans. It is simply a reality that is born from our relations. “Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man.”<sup>117</sup> Hence, to overcome political economy is to overcome our ignorance. To merely attack visible domination does not address the causes of alienation. Ignorance regenerates and perpetuates them. The same holds for the suffering of an individual within political economy. When one feels that society has robbed one’s own humanity, the will to power emerges. “If socialist writers attribute this world-historical role to the proletariat, this is by no means, as critical criticism assures us, because they regard the proletariat as *gods*.”<sup>118</sup> Willpower provides only a temporary relief if one remains attached to the self, which ultimately means an attachment to alienation.

What makes truth immanent and apparent for us is the immediacy of its dialectical movement in our lives. This same immediacy also causes the greatest difficulty for us, because it “demands of the thoughtless thinker that he bring both laws together and become aware of their antithesis.”<sup>119</sup> The process of bringing what seem like two opposites together and recognizing that they actually depend on each other is difficult because, at the beginning, the consciousness that desires independence and individuality sees the recognition of dependency as a disservice to itself. There is nothing to gain and so much to lose. It looks like giving up one’s own freedom. “Whether on the throne or in chains, in the utter dependence of its individual existence, its aim is to be free.”<sup>120</sup> Self-consciousness does not want to be dependent. Self-consciousness identifies absolute individuality with freedom and dependency with bondage.

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 78.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, “Alienation and Social Classes”, 134.

<sup>119</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 96.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 119.

What it takes for self-consciousness to realize that the acknowledgement of dependency actually leads to true independence and freedom rather than obtaining independence through abstraction and isolation is work. It takes a working consciousness to realize “The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman.”<sup>121</sup> This does not mean that to be free is to be a bondsman or to be a slave. But it means that there is something about freedom that the bondsman knows that the consciousness of the lord, obsessed with his own individuality, does not.

Through work, the worker understands that freedom is not the belief that “I *am free*, because I am not in an *other*, but remain simply and solely in communion with myself,”<sup>122</sup> and the determination to be “not distinct from myself.”<sup>123</sup> The worker realizes that freedom is not an inherent state of being or an essence that he possesses. When, finally, consciousness successfully achieves a state of total isolation, when “all restraints have been cast off... having divided against itself, all identity, all existence,”<sup>124</sup> it does not find itself to be free. Contrary to its expectation, consciousness “stands on the very edge of this innermost abyss, of this bottomless depth, in which all stability and Substance have vanished... wholly devoid of essentiality.”<sup>125</sup> In the moment of isolation, apart from others, consciousness was not able to discover an essence that it can call a self but it discovers itself as “this expendable, self-less being.”<sup>126</sup> On its own, it is nothing. It is only something when it is in relation to another.

*In a society where no one can any longer be recognized by others, each individual becomes incapable of recognizing his own reality.*<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 315.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 315.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>127</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 116.

The self is not defined by its opposition to others, as we commonly suppose. The self owes its existence to the other as when, at the start of self-consciousness, it consumes things, things it deems “inorganic nature”<sup>128</sup> and necessary for its own survival. Marx echoes Hegel: “Nature is man’s *inorganic body*...That man’s physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.”<sup>129</sup> This is the first moment of work which is consciousness’ coming to terms with the knowledge that it is dependent, the first characteristic of work and being a worker. It is in this regard that Hegel considers work to be discipline. It consists of two things, service and obedience. “Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains at the formal stage, and does not extend to the known real word of existence.”<sup>130</sup>

Service and obedience imply a relationship between the bondsman and the lord that is “one-sided and unequal,”<sup>131</sup> since the bondsman appears, in the lord’s eyes, the lesser and unessential. Everything that the bondsman makes is not for himself but for the bondsman. However, the fact that the bondsman is producing out of service and obedience helps him transcend the fear of losing himself; his work is not for his own aggrandizement.

The bondsman’s labor is purely for another; this is the opposite of wage labor. Wage labor is purely done out of fear because, in wage labor, there is a self to be kept alive. “Labor power is, therefore, a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to capital. Why does he sell it? In order to live.”<sup>132</sup> Hence, money possesses such great power in a society of wage labor because, for the wage-laborer, it has the power to keep him alive. With wage labor, it is hard to see work as service and obedience, to see work as for another.

---

<sup>128</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 107.

<sup>129</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 75.

<sup>130</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 119.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 116.

<sup>132</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 204.

In service and obedience, self-consciousness realizes “lordship has in reality turned out to be different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one.”<sup>133</sup> This insight is more than just a thought of the bondsman reassuring himself that the lord is not that powerful. It is actually an insight into the nature of existence in general. Obviously the lord acquires his physical livelihood and his identity, overall, his existence, through the bondsman; but the bondsman, in serving the lord, also acquires his own existence, albeit, the existence of a bondsman. “In production, men not only act on nature but also on one another.”<sup>134</sup> The bondsman in keeping the lord alive, in turn, is also keeping himself alive.

This is how the bondsman enters the real world of existence; the bondsman understands that existence is dependent. The more he exemplifies service and obedience, the clearer this insight is for him. For those who understand this dependency, all actions are done willingly out of service and obedience to others—they do not appear to be actions at all, because they are harmonious.

*Therefore the sage manages affairs without action,  
Carries out teachings without speech.  
Ten thousand things arise and he does not initiate them,  
They come to be and he claims no possession of them,  
He works without holding on,  
Accomplishes without claiming merit.  
Because he does not claim merit,  
His merit does not go away.*<sup>135</sup>

The same kind of work is done in the Buddhist practice of meditation, which is sometimes referred to as “work of mind,” directed towards the comprehension of dependent origination. In the *Majjhima Nikaya*, in the “Anapanasati Sutta”, the method of meditation that

---

<sup>133</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117.

<sup>134</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 207.

<sup>135</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 55.

begins with mindfulness of in-breaths and out-breaths, is supposed to help consciousness become aware of the dependency between in-breaths and out-breaths, between breath and body, between body and mind states, and so on. Awareness of dependency leads to an understanding of self not as a substance, but as an aggregation of interrelated parts.

The recognition of dependency is how individuals overcome alienation. As Marx says, “The individual *is the social being*. His life...is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*.”<sup>136</sup> Recognition of the social character of human existence is essential to liberation. It is not that social life is superior to the life of the individual, but that life itself is fundamentally social and thus dependent.

When working consciousness acknowledges that its existence is dependent on others, it does not remain passive. Self-consciousness must go outside itself and determine itself through its dealing with others (whether things or people) because those relations define its being. Consciousness is what it does in relation to others.

*As individuals express their life, so are they. What they are thus coincides with their production, both with what they produce and how they produce as well... it is not consciousness that determines life but life which determines consciousness.*<sup>137</sup>

The movement of self-consciousness outside itself in order to actualize itself is the second moment of work. By overcoming alienation through the acknowledgement of dependency, consciousness overcomes desire by inverting it: what was a desire to get from others becomes service to others. It is not getting what I desire and holding on to it that make me who I am. This contrasts with, for example, the one-sided belief of the capitalist who defines himself by accumulation, or even by the exploitation of others in order to get what he wants. This process of the self-becoming of self-consciousness through its relations with others appears

---

<sup>136</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Private Property and Communism”, 86.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, “The German Ideology”, 150.

in the *Phenomenology* in the bondsman's relationship to the object: "he only *works* on it."<sup>138</sup> When the bondsman "forms and shapes the thing,"<sup>139</sup> he knows that his work is not just for subsistence. By working on the object he creates himself; "in his service he *actually* brings this about."<sup>140</sup> Similarly, when a craftsman makes a table, the finished product reflects the being of the craftsman. What he makes reflects his needs, not merely his desires.

How can we distinguish needs from desires, especially in an age when the two are systematically confounded, e.g. by the field of marketing? To begin with, a need may be defined by the worker's willingness to work for its satisfaction; the worker recognizes that his needs can be satisfied only by work. When the worker produces to meet his needs, his needs and the work that he has put into are not separated from each other. The end product is not the only thing that matters for the worker. The whole working process is just as important, since the worker thereby exercises his capacity to actualize reality. The need of the worker is a combination of both the need for what the object (the table) can provide and the need to bring this about.

But for wage-labor, work appears only a means to satisfy one's needs. His needs are not satisfied by his own work but by the wage that he receives at the end of his labor. "His labour is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it."<sup>141</sup> Because there is a disconnection between needs and work, the laborer's needs may be degraded to nothing more than animalistic desires. "Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal."<sup>142</sup> Marx is enumerating the basic activities people engage in outside of labor time; for wage laborers these

---

<sup>138</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>141</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "Estranged Labour", 74.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, "Estranged Labour", 74.

activities tend to become the whole of their existence outside of working hours. We may disguise these activities as higher pursuits—making a culinary fetish of eating and drinking, valorizing sex as passion—but in the state of alienation they remain essentially animalistic. “What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.”<sup>143</sup>

Ultimately, humans need to work, to engage in conscious activity productive of life; this is what distinguishes man from animal. “Conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity.”<sup>144</sup> Consciousness cannot just wait passively doing nothing because by doing nothing it is nothing. With work, one's humanity is at stake. The unalienated worker realizes his humanity in work. Life and work are not separated.

Or, as the Buddha puts it, consciousness is simply its actions.

*"A disciple of the noble ones considers this: 'I am not the only one who is owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator; who — whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir. To the extent that there are beings — past and future, passing away and re-arising — all beings are the owner of their actions, heir to their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.' When he/she often reflects on this, the [factors of the] path take birth. He/she sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As he/she sticks with that path, develops it and cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the obsessions destroyed."*<sup>145</sup>

But not just any action creates the self; actions for others are what actualize individuality. It is not enough for one to be good, one has to actually do good for others. It is not enough to preach kindness, one has to actually show kindness to others. It is not enough to appear wise, one has to actually spread wisdom to others. One changes the world through one's actions towards

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 74.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 76.

<sup>145</sup> “Upajjhatthana Sutta: Subjects for Contemplation” (AN 5.57), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.057.than.html>.

others. And when those actions have effects on others, one's own being changes in the process. In this way the contradictions entailed by a world of independently existing selves is eliminated—one realizes that the two sides (the relationship of consciousness to things, or to other people) are not oppositional. The change in one is change in the other. The other's being is my own being. It is the 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'. This is why Marx says:

*Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust only for trust, etc. If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically-cultivated person; if you want to exercise influence over other people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a specific expression, corresponding to the object of your will, of your real individual life.*<sup>146</sup>

In the process, the two moments of desire are also overcome. Transgression is replaced by love.

*“One whose mind all day and night  
Takes delight in harmlessness,  
Who has loving kindness for all beings—  
For him there is enmity with none.”*<sup>147</sup>

And possession is replaced by giving.

*“Here one should give a proper gift,  
Here a gift bears great fruit.  
That's how, for one bestowing alms,  
An offering brings success — just so!”*<sup>148</sup>

Only through others one “becomes conscious of what he truly is.”<sup>149</sup> But wage labor is for the sole purpose of sustaining oneself: “What he produces for himself is *wages*, and silk, gold, palace resolve themselves for him into a definite quantity of the means of subsistence, perhaps into a cotton jacket, some copper coins and a lodging in a cellar.”<sup>150</sup> Thus not only is the

<sup>146</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society”, 105.

<sup>147</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 308.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*, 270.

<sup>149</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118.

<sup>150</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 205.



wage laborer alienated, or estranged, from others because he produces only for himself, he is also estranged from himself. “Here we have *self-estrangement*, as we had previously the estrangement of the *thing*.”<sup>151</sup> This is why, for Marx, wage labor is estranged labor—the more one engages in it the more one is alienated. Wage labor and political economy begin with the self yet stray further and further away from the self and culminate in self-estrangement. By contrast, the movement of the dialectic and dependent origination begins with recognition of the other and proceeds, not to self-estrangement, but to a return to unity with oneself, understood as dependent. “Returning is the movement of Tao.”<sup>152</sup>

Finally, we come back to the question, what does it mean that “The *truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman”? How is it the case that consciousness achieves freedom by recognizing its utter dependency? In the second moment of work, consciousness works on the thing thus makes itself actual, is loved when it loves, is trusted when it trusts, is wealthy when it enriches others; the same dialectical relationship holds for freedom. I am free only when others are free. I cannot be free when others are subjugated and I am aloof from others and their sufferings. If I perceive my freedom as separate from everyone else’s freedom, then I will arrive at contradictions and conflicts when my interests and those of others collide. Just as if I want to be loved I have to love, if I want to be trusted I have to trust, then in order to be free I have to free others. And one does that through the act of letting go or non-action.

*“And how, bhikkhus, is a bhikkhu a universal conqueror? When, having understood as they really are the origin, the passing away, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in regard to the six bases for*

---

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 75.

<sup>152</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 152.

*contact, a bhikkhu is liberated by nonclinging, such a bhikkhu is a universal conqueror.”*<sup>153</sup>

Or in the *Tao Te Ching*:

*To pursue Tao one decreases daily.  
To decrease and again to decrease,  
Until one arrives at not doing.  
Not doing and yet nothing is not done.*<sup>154</sup>

Letting go or non-action should not be understood as self-denial or passivity. When consciousness, even with understanding of the dialectic and dependency, has other goals such as love, wealth, or reputation, there is still present the distinction between self and other, lover and beloved, and so on. There is still an expectation of receiving something in return. As Marx says, “If you love without evoking love in return — that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a loved person then your love is impotent — a misfortune.”<sup>155</sup> Normally, even with what we assume is the selfless act of love, there is still a longing for reciprocal love — otherwise it is a lost cause. In this case, the individual is not yet free because he loves only to be loved in return. Letting go or non-action is not a rejection of the other; it does not merely accept what is agreeable and deny what is disagreeable, “This letting-go is the same renunciation of the one-sidedness of the Notion that in itself constituted the beginning.”<sup>156</sup> It is a full acceptance of what the other is and, therefore, a complete understanding of the other and its movement, “knowing is this seeming inactivity which merely contemplates how what is differentiated spontaneously moves in its own self and returns to its unity.”<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>153</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 1183.

<sup>154</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 168.

<sup>155</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society”, 105.

<sup>156</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 484.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 490.

Therefore, the *Tao Te Ching* evokes the image of the mother to represent the quality of the Tao, “which may be called the mother of all under heaven”<sup>158</sup> because, like motherly love, it brings everything into existence yet lets go of everything. It is all pervasive and nowhere to be found; hence, it is most dependent since it is connected to all things yet it is freest since it does not cling to anything.

Letting go and non-action are what give us the opportunity to create a space for dialogue and for dialogue to be successful. “The point is to actually participate in the community of dialogue.”<sup>159</sup> Without letting go of “individual life in its abstract form,”<sup>160</sup> the sense of self that opposes others, dialogue would only be conversations, talks or different forms of what ultimately are just monologues. “The spectator’s consciousness no longer knows anyone but *fictitious interlocutors* who subject him to a one-way monologue.”<sup>161</sup>

By fully accepting and knowing the other, through the dialectic and the recognition of dependency, self-consciousness becomes self-knowledge. The line between self and other, lord and bondsman, and the distinction itself is eroded, “Each in relation to the other lets go of the independent determinateness.”<sup>162</sup> Letting go and non-action is the actualization of this eroding of distinctions; it is activity within inactivity. For Marx, communism is the supersession of distinctions and separations. “Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction.”<sup>163</sup> Hegel echoes the Buddha: “This release of itself from the form of its Self is the supreme freedom and assurance of its self-knowledge.”<sup>164</sup> For Debord, the concept of class itself dissolves. “This historic mission of establishing truth in the world can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by

---

<sup>158</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 116.

<sup>159</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 187.

<sup>160</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 75.

<sup>161</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 218.

<sup>162</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 484.

<sup>163</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Communism and Private Property”, 92.

<sup>164</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 491.

atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able dissolve all classes,”<sup>165</sup> a class that lets go of class itself, and lets go of the idea that revolution entails one class eliminating its opposition to remain standing as the true reigning class. This is the negation of the negation, the antithesis of the antithesis. This is the third and the final moment of work.

Although this is the final moment, it is not the end. The final moment is not just the end nor the beginning, it is also both. It is the moment of consciousness realizing History. “*History...is a conscious, self-mediating process — Spirit emptied out into Time...the negative is the negative of itself.*”<sup>166</sup> It is not merely a moment of detached observation. When Hegel says that History is a self-mediating process he means that consciousness is engaged with every unfolding of historical or just day-to-day events with an openness devoid of abstraction. It also means that consciousness is connected to reality directly without relying on representations, mediations, or images to reconcile itself with its reality, “where dialogue has armed itself to impose its own conditions.”<sup>167</sup> In other words, because History is a self-mediating process; it requires consciousness to interact and engage. Thus History is an endless movement of relations and interactions. However, when historical consciousness is achieved, the movement continues not as the movement of alienation or suffering perpetuated by ignorance. Consciousness understands the world, things, and people, “as they are in themselves.”<sup>168</sup> This understanding manifests itself as community, “an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labor-power in full self-awareness as one single social labor force.”<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 221.

<sup>166</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 492.

<sup>167</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 221.

<sup>168</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 493.

<sup>169</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 171.

To speak of one single social labor force is not to reduce the many different forms of labor-power into an abstract unity. In actuality, it is the awareness that despite the myriad forms of labor-power they all depend on one another; that is what unites them into one single social labor force. Cultivating historical self-awareness is no easy task. As Hegel says, “the progress towards this goal is also unhalting, and short of it no satisfaction is to be found at any stations on the way.”<sup>170</sup> This should not discourage us. Instead, it should give us hope about what we can accomplish within the realm of political economy, capitalism, and spectacular society, even without a dazzling miracle to transform our circumstances.

*If we have chosen the position in life in which we can most of all work for mankind, no burdens can bow us down, because they are sacrifices for the benefit of all; then we shall experience no petty, limited, selfish joy, but our happiness will belong to millions, our deeds will live on quietly but perpetually at work, and over our ashes will be shed the hot tears of noble people.*<sup>171</sup>

Or, in the words of the *Tao Te Ching*:

*The sage never tries to store things up.  
The more he does for others, the more he has.  
The more he gives to other, the greater his abundance.  
The Tao of heaven is pointed but does no harm.  
The Tao of the sage is work without effort.*<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>170</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 51.

<sup>171</sup> Marx-Engels: *Collected Works*, Volume 1.

<sup>172</sup> Laozi, Tsu, L., Feng, G.-F., English, J. and Tzu, L. (1972) *Tao te ching*. 3rd edn. New York: Vintage Books, Chapter 81.

## **Chapter 2: Separation Perfected**

*Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle.*  
(The Society of the Spectacle, Page 8, Section 25)

Both the Buddha and Debord see natural consciousness' view of reality—the view that is held by non-historical, non-dialectical consciousness, and by beings who have not comprehend dependent origination—as a disease or pathology. In the previous chapter, we saw how the Buddha says to the person who does not understand dependent origination that his reality is “covered as with blight.”<sup>173</sup> The Buddha also speaks further about how the recovery of a sick person is similar to the path towards enlightenment for consciousness.

*"There are these three types of sick people to be found existing in the world. ...*

*"In the same way, these three types of people, like the three types of sick people, are to be found existing in the world. Which three?*

*"There is the case of the person who — regardless of whether he does or doesn't get to see the Tathagata, regardless of whether he does or doesn't get to hear the Dhamma & Discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata — will not alight on the lawfulness, the rightness of skillful mental qualities. There is the case of the person who — regardless of whether he does or doesn't get to see the Tathagata, regardless of whether he does or doesn't get to hear the Dhamma & Discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata — will alight on the lawfulness, the rightness of skillful mental qualities. There is the case of the person who will alight on the lawfulness, the rightness of skillful mental qualities if he gets to see the Tathagata and gets to hear the Dhamma & Discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata, but not if he doesn't.*

*"Now, it is because of the person who will alight on the lawfulness, the rightness of skillful mental qualities if he gets to see the Tathagata and gets to hear the Dhamma & Discipline proclaimed by the Tathagata — but not if he doesn't — that the teaching of the Dhamma has been allowed. And it is because there is this sort of person that the other sorts of persons are to*

---

<sup>173</sup> Walshe, *Digha Nikaya*, 223.

*be taught the Dhamma as well [on the chance that they may actually turn out to need and benefit from the teaching].*

*"These are the three types of people, like the three types of sick people, to be found existing in the world."<sup>174</sup>*

Debord describes spectacular society and its inhabitants as plagued by "a universal autism;"<sup>175</sup> he cites Joseph Gabel's *False Consciousness: An Essay on Reification*:

*...the obscuration of the dialectical aspect of things produces... autistic and mal-adapted collective behavior... [and] on the other hand, the appearance of utopian consciousness.<sup>176</sup>*

When the Buddha compares ignorance with blight, he does not mean that ignorance is a physical or even psychological disease, but a condition of being human. Neither is Debord invoking a mere physical and psychological disorder but a condition that is faced by the whole society.

*The fracturing of practice and the antidialectical false consciousness that results from that fracturing are imposed at every moment of everyday life subjected to the spectacle—a subjection that systematically destroys the "faculty of encounter" and replaces it with a social hallucination: a false consciousness of encounter, an "illusion of encounter."<sup>177</sup>*

This is what Gabel calls schizophrenia: "My definition is centred on the notion of 'Depravat' (deprivation) interpreted as a schizophrenic loss of dialectical perception of reality, that is to say, as a manifestation of reified consciousness."<sup>178</sup>

The schizophrenic experience as the loss of dialectical reality is at the center of advanced capitalism, the form of capitalism that seeks to resolve its internal contradictions through what Marx calls the real subsumption of labor under capital. At this stage, capital seems to have

<sup>174</sup> "Gilana Sutta: Sick People" (AN 3.22), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.022.than.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 218.

<sup>176</sup> Gabel, J., Thompson, M.A., with the assistance of Kenneth A. Thompson and introd. by Kenneth A. Thompson (1975) *False consciousness: An essay on Reification*. New York: Harper & Row Barnes & Noble Import Division, 26.

<sup>177</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 217.

<sup>178</sup> Gabel, *False Consciousness: An essay on Reification*, 43.

“acquired the occult ability to add value to itself.”<sup>179</sup> “This power which *maintains old values* and *creates new ones* is the power of capital, and that process is accordingly the process of *self-valorization*. Consequently it spells the impoverishment of the worker who creates value as *value alien to himself*.”<sup>180</sup> The contradiction is resolved when, in response to the autonomy of consciousness, reality itself becomes something that is also autonomous and self-maintained. Capitalism has acquired a life of its own, consummated in universal alienation and desire. Each side has secured its own sphere of abstract autonomy and this is the perfection of separation. This is what Debord calls the society of the spectacle. “It reveals itself for what it *is*: an autonomously developing separate power, based on the increasing productivity resulting from an increasingly refined division of labor into parcelized gestures dictated by the independent movement of machines and working for an ever-expanding market.”<sup>181</sup> How real subsumption of labor under capital and the society of the spectacle come about is the central issue of this chapter.

Schizophrenia is a medical term describing a psychological disorder with a biological component. Typical stages of a schizophrenic breakdown are described by the writer Andrew Solomon.

*When I came home, I felt a return of panic, and sadness of dinosaur proportions...I thought that I would die alone, and that there was no good reason to stay alive, and I thought that the normal and real world in which I had grown up, and which I believed that other people lived, would never open itself up to receive me.”*<sup>182</sup>

The standard treatment for this condition is pharmaceutical drugs.

*Every morning and every night, I look at the pills in my hand: white, pink, red, turquoise. Sometimes they seem like writing in my hand, hieroglyphics saying that the future may be all right and that I owe it to myself to live on*

---

<sup>179</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 255.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 988.

<sup>181</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 25.

<sup>182</sup> Solomon, A. (2015) *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*. United States: Scribner Book Company, 67.



*and see. I feel sometimes as though I am swallowing my own funeral twice a day, since without these pills, I'd be long gone.*"<sup>183</sup>

Here we see the schizophrenic disorder in its fully mature stage.

But to see schizophrenia as merely physical or psychological may be to see only its symptoms. Just as political economists confine themselves to the surface of political economy by imagining it as a system of laws ("He merely pushes the question away into a grey nebulous distance. He assumes in the form of fact, of an event, what he is supposed to deduce"<sup>184</sup>), an external understanding of schizophrenia also falls short. "Critical analysis of man's condition does not go deep enough into the determining cause of his inner phenomena; it does not follow the links of this chain down to the original phenomenon. It stops too quickly at the symptoms."<sup>185</sup> There is something about the condition of a person who is suffering schizophrenia that is shared by inhabitants of the realm of political economy and the spectacle. It is the loss of reality through the destruction of the "faculty of encounter" or, in other words, the inability to directly encounter reality which is the fundamental characteristic that underlies both the being of the schizophrenic and the inhabitants of political economy. That is not to say that the schizophrenic is not actually sick and that his disorder is merely a social or a theoretical phenomenon. Rather, it is to say that the schizophrenic is not the only one who is sick. If we believe the Buddha and Debord, the illness is pervasive.

If we take the schizophrenic experience as the loss of dialectical reality, then, by reading Hegel and Marx, we notice the onset of schizophrenia happens very early for consciousness. In "Estranged Labour", the laborer already experiences something like schizophrenia. "In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labour appears as *loss of reality* for

---

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>184</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "Estranged Labour", 71.

<sup>185</sup> Benoit, H. and Huxley, A. (1990) *Zen and the psychology of transformation: The supreme doctrine*. United States: Inner Traditions Bear and Company, 1.

the workers; objectification as *loss of the object* and *object-bondage*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*. So much does labour's realization appear as loss of reality that the worker loses reality to the point of starving to death."<sup>186</sup> The laborer is already a schizophrenic when he enters political economy or, more accurately, when the laborer realizes he is within political economy he sees himself as schizophrenic.

In the *Phenomenology*, self-consciousness becomes schizophrenic when it perceives itself as not just an autonomous and independent being but a being that is essentially unhappy.

*This unhappy, inwardly disrupted consciousness, since its essentially contradictory nature is for it a single consciousness, must for ever have present in the one consciousness of the other also; and thus it is driven out of each in turn in the very moment when it imagines it has successfully attained to a peaceful unity with the other.*<sup>187</sup>

Self-consciousness is unhappy when it not only finds itself unable to hold on to its object of desire, but in so doing finds that the very act of desiring has failed to do what it supposed it was doing: hold on to reality. Self-consciousness does not realize and cannot accept that, as we saw in the previous chapter, desire automatically brings about alienation or loss of reality. Instead, when self-consciousness becomes Unhappy Consciousness, it takes alienation as its essence. Unhappy Consciousness has thoroughly identified itself with unrequited desire. Because self-consciousness cannot see itself as anything else but as a desiring being, it feels that it is condemned to be unhappy. Prior to Unhappy Consciousness, self-consciousness refuses to admit defeat, just as the schizophrenic will at first deny that he has any disorder by trying to hold on to reality, trying to keep himself whole. But, eventually, the schizophrenic, like Unhappy

---

<sup>186</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "Estranged Labour", 72.

<sup>187</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 126.

Consciousness, acknowledges himself as “That which is mended is but patched and can never be whole again.”<sup>188</sup>

For both the laborer and the Unhappy Consciousness, there is already the seed of schizophrenia when consciousness first encounters the object. Hence, we do not need to wait until the severe symptoms appear as breakdowns, hallucinations, etc. to consider existence as schizophrenic. Schizophrenia is simply the natural outcome of self-consciousness. The difference between schizophrenia as a medical condition and schizophrenia as illusion of encounter is a difference in magnitude.

The schizophrenic or Unhappy Consciousness, despite being overwhelmed by suffering, is nonetheless clearly aware of his own condition. “You are in touch with the real terribleness of life;”<sup>189</sup> the schizophrenic understands that reality is not his. He is not the owner of reality and, ultimately, he is not even the owner of himself. “*Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual natured, merely contradictory being... The Unhappy Consciousness itself *is* the gazing of one self-consciousness into another.”<sup>190</sup> Unlike self-consciousness at the stage of self-certainty (when it is only concerned with absolute individuality at the expense of the other), Unhappy Consciousness, although concerned with its own individuality, now knows that the other is just as real

Yet, it is a truth that is one-sided and reified into another moment of false consciousness. Although it sees the other as real, Unhappy Consciousness still imagines that the other is separated from itself. The other is seen as a beyond, “a *supersensible* world which henceforth is the *true* world.”<sup>191</sup> For Unhappy Consciousness things become things-in-themselves. “The inner

---

<sup>188</sup> Solomon, *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*, 57.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>190</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 126.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 88.

world is, for consciousness, still a *pure beyond*, because consciousness does not as yet find itself in it.”<sup>192</sup> As the other consciousness, it becomes something godlike that confronts Unhappy Consciousness. “The first Unchangeable it knows only as an alien Being who passes judgment on the particular individual.”<sup>193</sup>

The estranged laborer in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* also exemplifies this encounter of consciousness with what it imagines as the beyond.

*If my one activity does not belong to me, if it is an alien, a coerced activity, to whom, then does it belong?*

*To a being other than me.*

*Who is this being?*

*The gods? To be sure, in the earliest times the principal production (for example, the building of temples, etc., in Egypt, India and Mexico) appears to be in the service of gods, and the product belongs to the gods.*<sup>194</sup>

To be sure, laborers during Marx’s time were not subject to the same gods as the Egyptians, Indians, and Mexicans. Godlike status is transferred to the master of labor who gives the laborer the means of his livelihood. “But the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour power, cannot leave the *whole class of purchasers, that is, the capitalist class*.”<sup>195</sup> Just as the God of Unhappy Consciousness is real because he is the creator of life, the capitalist class is also real because it is the source of the laborer’s livelihood. However, it is a reality that is inaccessible and hidden from the laborer. “The meaning which production has in relation to the rich is seen *revealed* in the meaning which it has for the poor. At the top the manifestation is always refined, veiled, ambiguous...”<sup>196</sup> The same holds for the schizophrenic who wonders

---

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>194</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 78.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 205.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 97-98.

about the origin of his suffering, how it is so real yet so foreign. His own condition is beyond words and, in the end, incommunicable.

*It was clear to my rational mind that I was going crazy again, and the awareness tired me further...I needed to hear another voice, even if only briefly, that could penetrate my fearful isolation...*

*"Hello?" she asked. "Hi", I said, and paused. "Has something happened?" she asked. It was immediately clear that I could not explain what had happened. I had nothing to say.*<sup>197</sup>

Since consciousness decides that the other is beyond its reach, this leaves consciousness no way to reconcile with the object and its reality. For this reason, Unhappy Consciousness and the schizophrenic can never be whole. "We have here only a personality confined to its own self and its own petty actions, a personality brooding over itself, as wretched as it is impoverished."<sup>198</sup> At the symptomatic level, it is a loss of reality. At a deeper level, the symptoms that consciousness experiences suggest consciousness' incapacity to connect with reality. There is no way for consciousness to achieve unity and reconciliation with reality. "Where that 'other' is sought, it cannot be found, for it is supposed to be just a *beyond*, something that can *not* be found."<sup>199</sup> For the laborer this is the moment when not only the product of his labor is alienated from him, but labor itself becomes alienating. "If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation."<sup>200</sup> Labor as what establishes the connection between the laborer and the product of labor no longer serves its purpose, just as the desire of Unhappy Consciousness also fails to hold on to reality. This also goes for the schizophrenic: due to the immense gap between his disorder and reality, reality is beyond reach and untrainable. No matter

<sup>197</sup> Solomon, *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*, 68.

<sup>198</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 136.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>200</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "Estranged Labour", 74.

how hard he tries, reality is forever outside of him. He is “divorced from external reality.”<sup>201</sup>

This is further elucidated by Elyn Saks in her book *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey through Madness* chronicling her experience of schizophrenia.

*In fact, it is not necessarily true that everything can be conquered with willpower. There are forces of nature and circumstance that are beyond our control, let alone our understanding, and to insist on victory in the face of this, to accept nothing less is asking for a soul-pummeling. The simple truth is, not every fight can be won.*<sup>202</sup>

As stated before, the realization of reality as independent from consciousness is a truth, but it is a truth that is one-sided and a moment of reified false consciousness. On the one hand, it is a truth because consciousness is finally able to acknowledge the other and, in the process, “it does indeed come *out of itself*,”<sup>203</sup> which is a necessary movement towards dialectical and historical consciousness. This is, in Buddhism, the moment of mindfulness (*sati*), when the practitioner realizes that everything, including the self, is other from himself and, therefore, he can no longer say that this or that is his.

*Any kind of feeling whatsoever...Any kind of perception whatsoever...Any kind of volitional formations whatsoever...Any kind of consciousness whatsoever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all consciousness should be seen as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this not my self.’*<sup>204</sup>

But, without further work to dissolve this abstract distinction between self and other, it is a reification because consciousness imagines the other as inherently independent and inherently real. It is mindfulness without insights of the interdependent and dialectical reality. Consciousness takes two steps forward and one step back.

---

<sup>201</sup> Solomon, *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*, 69.

<sup>202</sup> Saks, E.R. (2008) *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*. New York: Hyperion, 12.

<sup>203</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112.

<sup>204</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 902.

If ignorance is the root of the issue, then the repetitive returns and relapses of consciousness back to abstraction and its old patterns are moments of reification. “Reification...allows for a *complete return*.”<sup>205</sup> It is a return and reemergence of ignorance and abstraction. In the *Phenomenology*, before arriving at absolute or historical consciousness, every transition made by consciousness from one shape or one stage to the next is a moment of reification because at the beginning of every stage is abstraction. Even at the later stage of Reason, consciousness is not yet immune to reification. “Its *immediate appearance* on the scene is the abstraction of its *actual presence*, the essence and the *in-itself* of which is the absolute Notion, i.e. *the movement which has brought it into being*.”<sup>206</sup> The absolute Notion here means the dialectic. If ignorance was a sickness, then reification is a recontamination by the very same disease.

The sage in *Tao Te Ching* is free from sickness because he not only knows about the sickness but also prevents himself from becoming sick again. It is because he knows that he is sick that he is free from sickness, and not because he thinks that he is healthy. Likewise, true wisdom begins with the acknowledgment that one is ignorant, rather than being certain and complacent about how much one knows. In this way, the sage uproots the tendency to reify his sickness.

*From knowing to not knowing,  
This is superior.  
From not knowing to knowing  
This is sickness.  
It is by being sick of sickness,  
That one is not sick.*

*The sage is not sick.  
Because he is sick of sickness,*

---

<sup>205</sup> Gabel, *False Consciousness: An essay on Reification*, 150.

<sup>206</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 141.

*Therefore he is not sick.*<sup>207</sup>

For Unhappy Consciousness recognition of the Other as a beyond is a moment of reification because, at the core, it remains self-consciousness. Although Unhappy Consciousness acknowledges the other as real, since it is self-consciousness, it still desires. It has let go of its abstract self-certainty but it has not let go of desire. Hence the longing and the gazing towards the other. It is desire but, this time, as Unhappy Consciousness, it is desire for the unattainable and the impossible. We can even say that the desire of Unhappy Consciousness is fetishistic; this fetishism is what differentiates the desire of self-certainty from the desire of Unhappy Consciousness.

*There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race...I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour...*<sup>208</sup>

Unhappy Consciousness desires this other that has “the basic characteristic of dividedness and being-for-self in contrast to the individual consciousness.”<sup>209</sup> Unhappy Consciousness continues wishing to hold on to the other even if, in relation to the other, it has “a remote existence and remains utterly remote.”<sup>210</sup> What remains is this sense of what seems almost like a religious longing towards the transcendent divine. “The hope of becoming one with it [the other] must remain a hope, i.e. without fulfillment and present fruition, for between the hope and its fulfillment there stands precisely the absolute contingency or inflexible indifference which lies in the very assumption of definite form, which was the ground of hope.”<sup>211</sup> This internal tension between Unhappy Consciousness’ sense of futility and its unshakable desire

---

<sup>207</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 215.

<sup>208</sup> Marx, *Capital: Vol.1*, 165.

<sup>209</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 129.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, 129.



engenders “a purely casual, confused medley, the dizziness of a perpetually self-engendered disorder...this restless confusion.”<sup>212</sup>

The laborer faces the same tension. On the one hand, he wants to live an ethical and virtuous life, a life dedicated to the good of others. In other words, a social life. But the laborer also asks himself, “How can I live virtuously if I do not live?”<sup>213</sup> The tension is between the laborer’s social life and individual life. Marx addresses this tension in his writing *On the Jewish Question*. Marx frames the question around the situation of the German Jew. “The German Jews seek emancipation. What kind of emancipation do they want? *Civic, political* emancipation?”<sup>214</sup> But for Marx the predicament of the Jews in Germany represents the universal human tension between wanting emancipation in the personal, civil sphere and wanting emancipation in the political, social sphere. “With respect to the Jews the Christian state can only adopt the attitude of a Christian state. That is, it can permit the Jew, as a matter of privilege, to isolate himself from other subjects; but it must then allow the pressure of all the other spheres of society to bear upon the Jew, and all the more heavily since he is in *religious* opposition to the dominant religion.”<sup>215</sup> This is similar to the desire of Unhappy Unconsciousness since, for Marx, the Jew wants individual freedom while yearning for acceptance from society. This predicament is both a manifestation of Unhappy Consciousness and a prototype of the laborer's condition. The condition of the Jew represents the human condition; hence Marx’s statement, “The *social* emancipation of the Jew is the *emancipation of society from Judaism*.”<sup>216</sup>

This tension is even more intense for the schizophrenic because the tension is between two realities. On the one hand, the schizophrenic’s reality is always unstable and on the verge of

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>213</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 97.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid, “On the Jewish Question”, 26.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid, “On the Jewish Question”, 27.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid, “On the Jewish Question”, 52.

collapse. Within this reality, the schizophrenic is not only a threat to other people but also to himself. The reality of schizophrenia always undermines itself; the breakdowns begin within and spread outward into the external.

*Someone watching me. Something watching me. It's been waiting for this moment for so many years, taunting me, sending me previews of what will happen. Always before, I've been able to fight back, to push it until it recedes—not totally, but mostly, until it resembles nothing more than malicious little speck off to the corner of my eye, camped near the edge of my peripheral vision.*

*But now, with my arms and legs pinioned to a metal bed, my consciousness collapsing into a puddle, and no one paying attention to the alarms I've been trying to raise, there is finally nothing further to be done. Nothing I can do. There will be raging fires, and hundreds, maybe thousands of people lying dead on the streets. And it will all—all of it—be my fault.<sup>217</sup>*

On the other hand, there is conventional reality, one that the schizophrenic must live in accordance with. This is the reality coming from the outside and internalized by the schizophrenic. It is the reality that demands that the schizophrenic should behave and conform to societal expectations—the demand for the schizophrenic to appear normal.

*Part of the problem was that I was behaving like a patient in psychoanalysis. When Mrs. Joense and I were working together, I was encouraged to say exactly what was on my mind, always, no matter how crazy it sounded—that was how analysis worked. That was the point. Otherwise, how would she know what was going on inside me? But the people at MUIO didn't want to know. If they couldn't tolerate what was in my head, why were any of them in this business? When my scrambled thinking revealed itself, they put me in the hospital version of "time out." Where was the "treatment" in this? Were they wanting to help me get better, or did they just want me to be socially appropriate? Overall, the sole message they seemed to want me to get was "behave yourself!"<sup>218</sup>*

When these two realities collide, the schizophrenic no longer has a stable, unified sense of self. The schizophrenic now faces the fundamental contradiction of Unhappy Consciousness. The

---

<sup>217</sup> Saks, *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*, 4.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

schizophrenic is torn between two oppositions. Either the psychotic person is real or the social persona is real, but not both. It is between what the schizophrenic thinks he is and what the schizophrenic wants himself to be, between an unstable private life and a respectable social life.

*There were, in Kaplan's way of thinking, three different lenses through which I viewed myself—three "me's," as he put it, although without any implication that these were actual selves or personalities or people or anything of that sort—it was purely a heuristic device. One me was Elyn, one me was Professor Saks, and the third me was "the Lady of the Charts"—the person who was mental patient...*

*There were many days when I believed I was nothing more than the Lady of the Charts—a crazy woman who'd faked her way into a teaching job and would soon be discovered for what she really was and put where she really belonged—in a mental hospital. Other times, I denied that the Lady of the Charts even existed, because my illness wasn't real...Because how could I reconcile the Lady of the Charts coexisting alongside Elyn and Professor Saks? Either I was mentally ill or I could have a full and satisfying personal and professional life, but both things could not be equally true; they were mutually exclusive states of being. To admit one was to deny the other. I simply couldn't have it both ways. Didn't anyone understand this?<sup>219</sup>*

What consciousness needs to do is to find a way to reconcile with the other that is beyond it and, at the same time, preserve its own individuality. How can consciousness reach the other without undermining its desire? Consciousness accomplishes this dualistic task through mediation of the beyond. As Hegel says in the *Phenomenology*, "Being is then absolutely mediated."<sup>220</sup> At this point it might appear that the solution to the predicament of Unhappy Consciousness would be to get rid of mediation in order to have unmediated relations with people and things. However, Hegel really means it when he says that all consciousness is absolutely mediated. For Hegel, a dialectical relation is a mediated relation.

*Among the countless differences cropping up here we find in every case that the crucial one is that...pure being at once splits into what we have called the two 'Thises', one this as 'I', and the other 'This' as object. When*

---

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 263.

<sup>220</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 21.

*we reflect on this difference, we find that neither one nor the other is only immediately present ..., but each is at the same mediated: I have this certainty through something else, viz. the thing; and it, similarly, is...through something else, viz. through the 'I'.<sup>221</sup>*

In mediation, consciousness is being directly mediated by the other. And that which is on the other side of consciousness and behind the other is itself. Mediation is the entire movement of consciousness coming out of itself and returning to finally find itself through the other. There is no beyond or supersensible thing in mediation. Consciousness is directly mediated by the other and the other is directly mediated by consciousness. The third movement for both sides is a return into themselves. Nevertheless, it is not a retreat to the sphere of abstract thought but it is a movement that carries with it the real recognition of the other as mutually dependent.

*Each is for the other the middle term, through which each meditates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, and immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other.<sup>222</sup>*

Therefore, even though mediation is a triadic process, it remains dialectical as a direct interrelatedness between two interdependent entities. This triadic sequence is found in the *Tao Te Ching*.

*Tao gives birth to one,  
One gives birth to two,  
Two gives birth to three,  
Three gives birth to ten thousand beings.  
Ten thousand beings carry yin on their backs and embrace yang in their front,  
Blending these two vital breaths to attain harmony.<sup>223</sup>*

The Tao as the sequence of one, two and three is the same order as the path of development for consciousness. Consciousness begins as an abstract unity, as one, comes out of itself as two and,

---

<sup>221</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>223</sup> Chen, *Tao Te Ching*, 157.

finally, returns to itself as three. This movement, whether we call it the Tao or dialectic, is performed by all beings and gives them birth.

To say that consciousness is mediated by the other is to view the other as a means for its self-realization. This contrasts with Kant's attempt to provide a morality for political economy—which views beings as autonomous—by enjoining us to treat beings as ends rather than means. For Kant “autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature”<sup>224</sup> and, for that reason, “man, and in general every rational being, exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will.”<sup>225</sup> Political economy likewise valorizes autonomy or estrangement. “It stems from the very nature of estrangement that each sphere applies to me a different and opposite yardstick—ethics one and political economy another; for each is a specific estrangement of man and focuses attention on a particular round of estranged essential activity.”<sup>226</sup>

Nonetheless, to see the other as a means does not entail that the other is something to be used and then tossed aside. Seeing the other as a means is not to view nature or the other person as “an instrument for getting hold of absolute being.”<sup>227</sup> Marx also speaks about the ways that people are viewed as instruments.

*The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parents and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour.*

*But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the bourgeoisie in chorus.*

<sup>224</sup> Kant, I. and Ellington, J.W. (1993) *Grounding for the metaphysics of morals ; with, on a supposed right to lie because of philanthropic concerns*. 3rd edn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 41.

<sup>225</sup> Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 35.

<sup>226</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The Meaning of Human Requirements”, 97.

<sup>227</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 73.

*The bourgeois sees his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women.*

*He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production.*<sup>228</sup>

To recognize the other as a means for realization but not as an instrument for exploitation is for consciousness to see its dependence on the other as the only way to know itself. For consciousness to engage in exploitation would itself be unconsciousness, a failure to recognize that in so doing it harms itself. As Hegel says in the *Phenomenology*, when consciousness wants to exploit the other, “Here, then, we have a struggle against an enemy, to vanquish whom is really to suffer defeat, where victory in one consciousness is really lost in its opposite.”<sup>229</sup> Paranoiac mistrust is equally unconscious because it shows that, in relation to the other, consciousness “is not as yet explicitly aware that this [other] is its essential nature, or that it is the unity of both.”<sup>230</sup> The willingness to trust another in spite of the potential risk is an indication of awareness rather than ignorance.

On this basis we can better understand the schizophrenic condition. Although the most alienating and antagonizing aspect of schizophrenia is the symptoms themselves, we can see that the symptoms are not actually the problem, just as the symptoms of political economy are not themselves the problem. The schizophrenic needs to encounter his symptoms directly in order to understand how schizophrenia shapes his experience and, in turn, how to overcome its causes—the same holds for Unhappy Consciousness and the estranged laborer. This encounter is a return to dialectical reality, the deepest need of anyone suffering either the medical or the more prevalent form of schizophrenia.

---

<sup>228</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, 487-488.

<sup>229</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 127.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, 126.

*...what has allowed me to see the meaning in my struggles—to make sense of everything that happened before and during the course of my illness, and to mobilize what strengths I may possess into a rich and productive life—is talk therapy. People like me with a thought disorder are not supposed to benefit much from this kind of treatment, a talk therapy oriented toward insight and based upon relationship. But I have. There may be a substitute for the human connection—for two people sitting together in a room, one of them with the freedom to speak her mind, knowing the other is paying careful and thoughtful attention—but I don't know what that substitute might be. It is, at the heart of things, a relationship, and for me it has been the key to every other relationship I hold precious.*<sup>231</sup>

Saks is referring to the practice of psychoanalysis, but the effectiveness of her therapy was not due to the presence of an expert supposed, on her behalf, to resolve the problems and do the work for her. She was not engaging in a monologue but rather actively trying to participate in a dialogue, perhaps not explicitly in words but in her attitude. “I wanted to know how and why psychoanalysis had worked for me. I wanted to know what was in my analysts’ minds when they treated me. I wanted to experience being on the other side of the couch.”<sup>232</sup> She is not fetishizing the analyst. Again, the analyst is there only to assist and, in the process, come to term with her disorder rather than running away from it. “Ironically, the more I accepted I had a mental illness, the less the illness defined me—at which point the riptide set me free.”<sup>233</sup>

In practice the actual tendency of the schizophrenic and the alienated individual is, instead, to turn away from the alienating reality. Mediation, as a process of direct and interdependent encounter between consciousness and others, becomes distorted into an interaction that is mediated by a third thing. “This mediated relation is thus a syllogism in which the individuality, initially fixed in its antithesis to the *in-itself*, is united with this order extreme only through a third term.”<sup>234</sup> The mediator acts as the unifying and reconciling force that brings

<sup>231</sup> Saks, *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*, 331.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid*, 296.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid*, 304.

<sup>234</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 136.

together the two independent sides. Unhappy Consciousness encounters its mediator in the historical form of the minister or the priest. This third thing accomplishes what consciousness itself fails to do.

*Through this middle term the one extreme, the Unchangeable, is brought into relation with the unessential consciousness, which equally is brought into relation with the Unchangeable only through this middle term; thus this middle term is one which presents the two extremes to one another, and ministers to each in its dealing with the other.*<sup>235</sup>

The clerical mediator is seen as the one who is capable of connecting Unhappy Consciousness with the beyond because he has “a direct relationship with the Unchangeable.”<sup>236</sup> This direct access is something that Unhappy Consciousness assumes that it does not possess. This surrender of Unhappy Consciousness, “The surrender of its own will,”<sup>237</sup> appears to come from humility but in fact it conceals consciousness’ secret desire. By giving up its will (the means for consciousness to encounter the other) what it gets in return is a secure and intact sense of Self. This superficial humility fulfills the still-alienated desire of Unhappy Consciousness. The sense of self is secretly taken to a new height. Self-consciousness does not merely want to secure its own sphere of personal freedom. The clerical mediator allows self-consciousness to become all reality; this is what makes this third thing so appealing for Unhappy Consciousness. In this mediator Unhappy Consciousness can see itself.

*This unity of objectivity and being-for-self, which lies in the Notion of action, and which therefore becomes for consciousness essence and object—this unity is not the principle of its action, and so too it does not come an object for consciousness, directly and through itself. Rather, it lets the mediating minister express this certainty, a certainty which is itself still incomplete, that its misery is only in principle the reverse, i.e. that its action brings it only in principle self-satisfaction or blessed enjoyment; that is pitiable action too is only in principle the reverse, viz. an absolute*

---

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 137.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 138.



*action; that in principle, action is only really action when it is the action of a particular individual. But for itself, action and its own actual doing remain pitiable, its enjoyment remains pain, and the overcoming of these in a positive sense remains a beyond. But in this object, in which it finds that its own action and being, as being that this particular consciousness, are being and action in themselves, there has arisen for consciousness the idea of Reason, of the certainty that, in its particular individuality, it has being absolute in itself, or is all reality.*<sup>238</sup>

The mediator does not appear only in the form of the minister. The mediator appears in different forms within different settings. As a third thing, it does not have to be a person. For the laborer, as a producer, in order for his product to reach other people, he must bring his product to the market and participate in exchange. Those who enter the market do not enter it as human beings but as “owners of private properties.”<sup>239</sup> Within exchange, these owners of private properties do not transact with each other directly but their products, as commodities, serve as mediators that come between the owners. Hence, on the market, people are not simply owners of private properties, they are guardians of commodities. “Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities.”<sup>240</sup>

Since exchange is, in capitalism, “a general social process”<sup>241</sup>, commodities are more than just an apparatus for exchange. Above all, the commodity is the producer’s sanction to participate in social life. Although commodities are what allow the guardians to interact with one another, they do not directly confront each other in the process of exchange. Each is absorbed in the search for use-value. “The owner of a commodity is prepared to part with it only in return for other commodities whose use-value satisfies his own need... exchange is merely an individual process for him... It does not matter to him whether his own commodity has any use-value for the owner

---

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 138.

<sup>239</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 178.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, 180.

of the other commodity of not.”<sup>242</sup> The commodity is the mediator for the producer because it is both personally useful and socially exchangeable. The commodity form is what sets boundaries between people but, more importantly, it is also what ties people together on the economic stage, which is simply the realm of social interactions mediated by commodities.

*Here the persons exist for one another merely as representatives and hence owners, of commodities...we shall find, in general, that the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other.*<sup>243</sup>

For both the wage-laborer and the master of labor, the mediator or third thing appears in two instances. In wage-labor, the laborer is not just a producer—he is not just in a relation between himself and the object. On the individual level, the wage is the third thing that comes in between the laborer and the product of his labor. The product that he makes is not “his direct means of life;”<sup>244</sup> his product is something that is for other people on the market or for the master of labor. The laborer is willing to part with the product but he is not willing to part with his wage because that is “a means to enable him to exist.”<sup>245</sup> On the side of the master of labor, his interest lies in the labor power of the laborers. From the master’s perspective, the laborer himself is the mediator. As the third thing, the laborer has now become a commodity, “He is a commodity which passes from the hand of one owner to that of another.”<sup>246</sup> Being seen as a commodity is more than just being turned into a thing. Thinghood has a designated existence while a commodity is merely instrumental. That is why Marx sees the wage-laborer as worse off than the feudal serf. “The *serf* sells only a part of his labour power. He does not receive a wage from the

---

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 178-179.

<sup>244</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 75.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 204.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 204.

owner of the land; rather the owner of the land receives a tribute from him.”<sup>247</sup> The wage concretizes the laborer’s existence as a commodity.

The schizophrenic may not see reality in terms of use-value, exchange-value, and so on. Elyn Saks, as a schizophrenic, simply wants a good and fulfilling life. “I also wanted to dispel the myths held by many mental-health professionals themselves—that people with a significant thought disorder cannot live independently, cannot work at challenging jobs, cannot have true friendships, cannot be in meaningful, sexually satisfying relationships, cannot lead lives of intellectual, spiritual, or emotional richness.”<sup>248</sup> There is, of course, a price to be paid to dispel those myths and turn them into a reality. “I write, then, because I know what it’s like to be psychotic. And I know, better than most, how the law treats mental patients, the degradation of being tied to a bed against your will and force-fed medicine you didn’t ask for and do not understand.”<sup>249</sup>

But there are other forms of coercion operating on the schizophrenic, as on the subjects of political economy, less dramatic than being coerced into a mental institution. This coercion may be gradualized, so as to win the schizophrenic’s acceptance. The message may be: “I have a major mental illness. I will never fully recover from schizophrenia. I will always need to be on antipsychotic medication and in talk therapy. I will always have good days and bad, and I still get sick.”<sup>250</sup> This leads to the conclusion: “But the treatment I have received has allowed a life I consider wonderfully worth living.”<sup>251</sup> Seen in this light, it no longer appears that the

---

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 205.

<sup>248</sup> Saks, *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*, 331.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 331.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 334.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 334.

schizophrenic is being forced into treatment; the schizophrenic becomes willing to be part of the treatment even if it is potentially permanent. Furthermore, there is no reason to leave.

*That said, I don't wish to be seen as regretting that I missed the life I could have had if I'd not been ill...With proper treatment, someone who is mentally ill can lead a full and rich life...My good fortune is not that I've recovered from mental illness. I have not, nor will I ever. My good fortune lies in having found my life.*<sup>252</sup>

This is not to castigate Saks for making the best out of her situation, or anyone seeking treatment. It is to better understand how Saks specifically and people with schizophrenia in general view their predicaments. The treatment is the mediator; it becomes all of reality for the schizophrenic. This can be in the form of the myriad drugs the patient has to take. "A number of drugs, such as BuSpar, which acts on certain nerves sensitive to serotonin, are used for long-term control of anxiety. There are also fast-acting drugs, the benzodiazepines –a category that includes Klonopin, Ativan, Valium, and Xanax."<sup>253</sup> The mediator for the schizophrenic can also be the therapist or psychiatrist. "I am lucky to have good insurance that pays for me to make weekly visits to a therapist and monthly visits to a psychopharmacologist."<sup>254</sup> Saks expresses her distress when her therapist did not meet her expectations, which only shows how vulnerable and desperate the schizophrenic's situation is.

*My anger alternated with despair. My analyst, the one who was supposed to know me the best, the one whose job it was to help me navigate and understand my world, obviously thought I was ultimately slated to be nothing more than a street person. Well, then, maybe I should just move to the streets and be don't with it. I'm destined for degradation. I belong on the streets. All else is pretense.*<sup>255</sup>

In the end, everything stays the same for the schizophrenic.

---

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 336.

<sup>253</sup> Solomon, *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*, 119.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>255</sup> Saks, *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*, 266.

*I've decided not to go off medications. I'm not sure that I'm addicted, but I am dependent: without the drugs I would run the risk of emerging symptoms of illness. It's a fine line. I have gained an unbecoming amount of weight. I get weird hives for no apparent reason. I sweat more. My memory, never very good, is mildly impaired: I frequent forget what I am saying in the middle of a sentence. I get headaches a lot. I get occasional muscular cramps...It's not ideal, but it seems to put up a real wall between me and my depression. The last two years are without question the best decade. Slowly, I will now catch up. When two friends died not long ago, both in freak-accidents, I felt terribly sad, but I did not feel myself slipping out of my hands, and to feel just grief was almost (I know this sounds terrible, but in some selfish way it is true) a kind of satisfaction.<sup>256</sup>*

Ultimately, the final option is not for the schizophrenic to find a way out but to entrust the future to the possibility of better and more efficient treatments.

*Researchers are working in four directions toward new treatments. The first is to shift as far as possible to preventative therapies: the sooner you can mental problems of any kind, the better off you are. The second is increased specificity of drugs...The third is faster drugs. The fourth is more specificity to symptom rather than to biological position, so that the experimentation to choose drugs can be abrogated.<sup>257</sup>*

The mediator or the third thing appears variously as a minister, as the commodity form, as wages, as drugs, and psychiatrists. All these forms can exist and occupy the same place at the same time. The problems of Unhappy Consciousness, the laborer, and of the schizophrenic are problems that all exist within today's society. Awareness of the role that those mediating forms play within the dialectical movement reveals to us the basic underlying form that is shared by all these manifestations. As the third thing, the most basic form of the mediator is not strictly a material thing or person. Fundamentally, the third thing for consciousness is simply representations and images. Kant speaks of representation as our primary mode of knowledge.

*Now if we find that on the assumption that our cognition from experience conforms to the objects as things in themselves, the unconditioned cannot be thought at all without contradiction, but that on the contrary, if we*

---

<sup>256</sup> Solomon, *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*, 124.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

*assume that our representation of things as they are given to us does not conform to these things as they are in themselves but rather that these objects as appearances conform to our way of representing, then the contradiction disappears.*<sup>258</sup>

Representations resolve the contradiction between the subjective world of concepts and the objective world of things. Representation, as the middle term, is where the two independent sides meet. With that statement, Kant renounces any hope of direct knowledge; knowledge or cognition must always rely on the middle term. This middle term is what Marx calls ideology in *The German Ideology*.

*Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the product of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declared them the true bonds of human society).*<sup>259</sup>

But representations are not enough. Representations need a concrete existence. Images, like commodities, are material manifestations of representations.

*The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people mediated by images.*<sup>260</sup>

Together representations and images become spectacles. Representations are the mental mediator and images are the material mediator; together they are the two wheels which put spectacular society in motion. "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles."<sup>261</sup> The spectacle, like earlier forms of the third thing, is the force that unifies opposites. It no longer is confined to a specific setting, but now appears as the unifying force of all oppositions within reality.

---

<sup>258</sup> Kant, I. (1999) *Critique of pure reason*. Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 112.

<sup>259</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "The German Ideology", 149.

<sup>260</sup> Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, 8.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

*The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is ostensibly the focal point of all vision and consciousness.*<sup>262</sup>

From a Marxian point of view one might ask, why does Debord talk about representations and images rather than ideologies and commodities? It is Debord's fundamental insight that representations and images are the basic forms of ideologies and commodities. They are basic and the most primitive forms because they correspond to the fundamental acts of consciousness, vision and observation. Not everyone acknowledges being implicated in commodity production and ideological control, but everyone engages in the actions of watching, looking, and seeing. Our difficulty in understanding the real subsumption of labor under capital is that we do not realize the power of vision. It is powerful because we constantly do it, but also because of its historical importance. As Debord says, "The most modern aspect of the spectacle is the most archaic."<sup>263</sup>

Diana Eck, in her book *Darśan*, talks about the religious significance of seeing, images and vision in ancient Hindu traditions.

*A common sight in India is a crowd of people gathered in the courtyard of a temple or at the doorway of a streetside shrine for darśan of the deity. Darśan means "seeing." In the Hindu ritual tradition it refers especially to religious seeing, or the visual perception of the sacred. When Hindus go to a temple, they do not commonly say, "I am going to worship," but rather, "I am going for darśan." They go to "see" the image of the deity—be it Kṛṣṇa or Durgā, Śiva or Viṣṇu—present in the sanctum of the temple, and they go especially at those times of day when the image is most beautifully adorned with fresh flowers and when the curtain is drawn back so that the image is fully visible. The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. Darśan is sometimes translated as the "auspicious sight" of the divine, and its importance in the Hindu ritual complex reminds us that for Hindus "worship" is not only a matter of prayers and offerings and the devotional disposition of the heart. Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with*

---

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid, 7.

*religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine.*<sup>264</sup>

Representations and images are important to the Hindus not merely because they are figures and idols, but because those representations and images, as figures and idols, are the connecting point between the mundane and divine. Thus they have a reality of their own and the worshippers can have religious relations with them. When those images and idols are recreated, it is a recreation of the divine reality. However, since the images and representations are recreations of the divine, the only way that the worshipper can act towards them is by looking and watching. In this way, vision becomes a profound experience.

This is precisely the process of commodity fetishism for Marx. The subject no longer sees his relations, even relations towards the divine, as natural, direct social relations between two entities (in these cases between the worshipper and the divine, the producer and his product.) The social nature or connective power of the relation manifests from the relation itself. Instead, in commodity fetishism, the social characteristic lies in another independent object as the mediator that brings together two separated entities. Hence, commodities, like representations and images, are already a different class of objects which themselves play a different kind of role.

*The mysterious character of the commodity-form reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the product of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.*<sup>265</sup>

And so for the worshipper, it is not the gods themselves that he fetishizes. He fetishizes the power of the representations and images that bring the divine to him. All that is left for him is simply look on.

---

<sup>264</sup> Eck, D.L. (1998) *Darśan: Seeing the divine image in India*. 3rd edn. New York: Columbia University Press, 3.

<sup>265</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 164-165.



The worlds of Unhappy Consciousness, political economy, and schizophrenia already contained within themselves spectacular components. Unhappy Consciousness wants to achieve the same result by recreating its experience of the divine through relics and religious items. It is not a conscious experience but rather a sensational experience that is ultimately visual, because the goal of Unhappy Consciousness is to create a scene. “Its thinking as such is no more than the chaotic jingling of bells, or a mist of warm incense, a musical thinking that does not get as far as the Notion, which would be the sole immanent objective mode of thought.”<sup>266</sup>

The political economists who conceive political economy and capitalism as laws, “the *stable* image of unstable appearance,”<sup>267</sup> are also holding on to a spectacular view of reality. The political economists do not see that “Men are producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definitive development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms.”<sup>268</sup> But because the circumstances of reality are considered as eternal laws, they “appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina from their physical life process.”<sup>269</sup>

Schizophrenia, as defined by Elyn Saks, “entails a profound loss of connection to reality. It is often accompanied with delusions, which are fixed yet false beliefs—such as you have killed thousands of people—and hallucinations, which are false sensory perceptions—such as you just seen a man with a knife.”<sup>270</sup> We can see that the delusions are representations and the hallucinations are images for the schizophrenic; delusions and hallucinations are what stand

---

<sup>266</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 131

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>268</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The German Ideology”, 154.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>270</sup> Saks, *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*, 168.

between the schizophrenic and the real world beyond. Gabel's account of the schizophrenic's experience with hallucinations showcases the fully spectacular nature of schizophrenia.

*The problem...of visual hallucinations in schizophrenia has often preoccupied the theorists. Arieti emphasizes in this connection that during sleep the most primitive senses come to the fore. The tactile and olfactory sense are certainly more primitive than the visual sense...This is not the case in the hallucinatory state. Since the visual centres are then involved in a much more intense contribution than the auditory centres, the performance of the 'sensory' requirements of the deranged state would hence forth inhibit the latter. Schneider has suggested a similar explanation. Optical hallucinations appear in schizophrenia involving extreme intellectual deterioration (Bumke)...Schneider is also one of the first to insist on the similarities of schizophrenia...with the state of falling asleep.<sup>271</sup>*

As Debord puts it, "As long as necessity is socially dreamed, dreaming will remain necessary. The spectacle is the bad dream of a modern society in chains and ultimately expresses nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep."<sup>272</sup> The person who has medical schizophrenia might be comparable to a narcoleptic who cannot help but fall asleep due to his condition. For the social schizophrenic, however, his sleep is self-induced. Sleep and dreams are his methods of escaping the real world.

One should then be careful to not make the mistake of assuming that only the schizophrenic experiences what we consider distortions of reality in the forms of delusions and hallucinations. As long as we have not yet reached dialectical and historical consciousness or not yet understand dependent origination, we, in some way, are just as delusional as the schizophrenic. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist Zen master, says in his book *Understanding Our Mind*, "We live in a universe filled with false images and delusions, yet we believe that we are

---

<sup>271</sup> Gabel, *False Consciousness: An essay on Reification*, 280-281.

<sup>272</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 21.

truly in touch with the world.”<sup>273</sup> Unlike those who we identify as schizophrenics, those who experience hallucinations and delusions as episodes, we fail to notice our own delusions and hallucinations because, in actuality, they happen so frequently to us. “Most of our perception, longing, and aversion occur in the mode of representations or in the third mode of perception, the mode of mere images.”<sup>274</sup> There is a reason why we cling onto representations and images—they provide us with what we want to see, which we mistake for real relations without confronting reality at all.

*When we fall in love, for example, we usually fall in love with an image we have of our beloved. We cannot eat, sleep, or do anything because this image in us is so strong. Our beloved is beautiful to us, but our image of him may actually be far from reality. We don't realize that the object of our perception is not the reality-in-itself but an image we have created. After we marry and live with our beloved for two or three years, we realize that the image that we held on to and stayed awake at night thinking about was largely false...Our consciousness manifests an image of the object and we love that image. The image we love may have nothing to do with the person-in-himself. It is like taking a photograph of a photograph.*<sup>275</sup>

The lover is willing to hold on to the image of the beloved even though it is detrimental to his happiness. He clings to what he wants the beloved to be rather than who she really is. Similarly, we, as wage-laborer as a spectator, want to hold on to the image of capitalism as a self-valorized system. In the spectacle because capitalism and the spectacle present to us a reality that can bring about our desire for abstract autonomy and freedom. One aspires to make the image of capitalism a reality because then one can imagine that “as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realization of

---

<sup>273</sup> Hanh, T.N. and Neumann, R. (2006) *Understanding our mind: Fifty verses on Buddhist psychology*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 29.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 54.

his labour-power.”<sup>276</sup> It is important not only to make capitalism a reality but an autonomous reality, because the more autonomous the sphere of circulation is the more one can realize one’s own autonomy. Not only is capitalism the sphere of abstract freedom but it is also what gives us the illusion of social human interactions without actually relating to and recognizing one another, since everything is already pre-determined under the real subsumption of labour under capital. At this stage, capitalism, conceived and actualized as the autonomous mediator, resolves its own contradiction and the contradiction that resides within its inhabitants.

*The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract, as free persons, who are equal before law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bring them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each. Each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the others. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together for their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest.*<sup>277</sup>

What Marx describes capitalism as real subsumption is what Debord describes as the society of the spectacle. Their descriptions differ but fundamentally both describing the same phenomenon. Debord is saying that this phenomenon of coming together in separation happens not only within the sphere of circulation or commodity exchange. It is the ubiquitous reality of today’s society as the society of the spectacle. Just as ownership of commodities what keeps

---

<sup>276</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 273.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, 280.

people apart but also brings them together, in the world of the spectacle, being a spectator both joins people and keeps them apart. Standing in between them are spectacles.

*The spectacle was born from the world's loss of unity, and the immense expansion of the modern spectacle reveals the enormity of this loss. The abstractifying of all individual labor and the general abstractness of what is produced are perfectly reflected in the spectacle, whose manner of being concrete is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, a part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is simply the common language of this separation. Spectators are linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness.*<sup>278</sup>

It is this phenomenon of the spectators encountering the spectacle and, through the spectacle, reflecting back into themselves is what turns the being of the spectators into what Hegel calls illusory being. "Illusory being is the same thing as *reflection*;<sup>279</sup> but it is reflection as *immediate*. For illusory being that has withdrawn into itself and so is estranged from its immediacy, we have the foreign word *refection*."<sup>279</sup> The estrangement from immediacy faced by the illusory being is the estrangement of the spectator who is alienated from the spectacle even though it is immediate to him. "The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere."<sup>280</sup> The dialectical movement or the movement of working consciousness also contains within it the moment of reflection but it can only come after the encounter with the other. In work, the other is immediate. For the consciousness of the illusory being and the spectator, the moment of reflection is what is immediate.

The movement of consciousness as the Tao is one (abstract unity), two (coming out of itself), and three (the moment of return). The movement of the society of the spectacle, by

---

<sup>278</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 29.

<sup>279</sup> Miller, A.V., Findlay, J.N., Hegel, G.W.F. and Friedrich, W. (1991) *Hegel's 'science of logic'*. United States: Prometheus Books, 399.

<sup>280</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 30.

contrast, is one, three, and two. It is a movement that has been inverted. The spectator encounters the mediator, as images and representations first, which is merely its own reflection, before he can come into contact with the other. If being a spectator means consciousness is alienated from reality, then the spectacle is the reflection of consciousness' alienation back on itself. "This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society."<sup>281</sup>

To use the example of the lover again, when the lover looks at his beloved, he is not looking directly but through an image that he creates. Likewise, his beloved does the same thing by perceiving through an image that she creates. They also interact with each other through representations in the forms of judgments, doubts, and ideas about each other. Both are already engaging with each other as spectators and, by making images and judgments, they are already part of the production of spectacles. The spectacle already appears within personal and societal relations. Thus, Debord cautions us. "The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual excess produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, that has become an objective reality."<sup>282</sup>

The whole sectors of the economy dedicated to the production of images and representations—the materialization process of spectacular society requires sectors dedicated to spectacular production. "In all of its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle is the *model* of the prevailing way of life."<sup>283</sup> A prominent example is the role that celebrities play in the society of the spectacle. Celebrities are images and representations of people and what their lives could be.

---

<sup>281</sup> Ibid, Section 8.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid, Section 5.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid, Section 6.

*Stars — spectacular representations of living human beings — project this general banality into images of permitted roles. As specialists of apparent life, stars serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations that they actually live. The function of these celebrities is to act out various lifestyles or sociopolitical viewpoints in a full, totally free manner. They embody the inaccessible results of social labor by dramatizing the by-products of that labor which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals: power and vacations — the decision-making and consumption that are at the beginning and the end of a process that is never questioned. On one hand, a governmental power may personalize itself as a pseudo-star; on the other, a star of consumption may campaign for recognition as a pseudo-power over life. But the activities of these stars are not really free and they offer no real choices.<sup>284</sup>*

The real danger, however, is that, within the world of spectacular capitalism, anything can be turned into a spectacle. Events of everyday life, if the purpose is to put up an appearance, can become spectacles.

*The concept of “the spectacle” interrelates and explains a wide range of seemingly unconnected phenomena. The apparent diversities and contrasts of these phenomena stem from the social organization of appearances, whose essential nature must itself be recognized. Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human social life with appearances.<sup>285</sup>*

A spectacle can be what wear, how we speak, the things we own, and so on. The worldview that we can connect with others by impressing people, by showcasing oneself, by making ourselves appear great in people’s eyes is what the spectacle is really about. Within spectacular society, reality is not determined by direct relations but how we appear to one another. When Marx speaks of the power of money, he is speaking of money as basic to the spectacle.

*Being the external, common medium and faculty for turning an image into reality and reality into a mere image (a faculty no springing from*

---

<sup>284</sup> Ibid, Section 60.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid, Section 10.

*man as man or from human society as society), money transforms the real essential powers of man and nature into what are merely abstract conceits and therefore imperfections—into tormenting chimeras—just as it transforms real imperfections and chimeras—essential powers which are really important, which exist only in the imagination of the individual—into real powers and faculties.*

*Money, then, appears as this overturning power both against the individual and against the bonds of society, etc., which claim to be essences in themselves. It transforms fidelity into infidelity, love into hate, hate into love, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, idiocy into intelligence and intelligence into idiocy.*<sup>286</sup>

Debord also talks about the true function of money as more than just an instrument for exchange.

As the basis for the spectacle, it can transform life itself.

*The spectacle is the flip side of money. It, too, is an abstract general equivalent of all commodities. But whereas money has dominated society as the representation of universal equivalence — the exchangeability of different goods whose uses remain uncomparable — the spectacle is the modern complement of money: a representation of the commodity world as a whole which serves as a general equivalent for what the entire society can be and can do. The spectacle is money one can only look at, because in it all use has already been exchanged for the totality of abstract representation. The spectacle is not just a servant of pseudo-use, it is already in itself a pseudo-use of life.*<sup>287</sup>

Hence lies, falsehoods, and untruths form the foundation of the society of the spectacle and its spectators. “In a world that has *really been turned upside down*, the true is a moment of the false.”<sup>288</sup> It gets to the point where we rely on the spectacle not so much because we are afraid to be genuine and authentic. Rather, it is because the spectacle is the one and only reality, and there are no other realities to compete against it. We are so used to lying that we no longer know the truth.

---

<sup>286</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The Power of Money”, 105.

<sup>287</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Section 49.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid*, Section 9.



Ultimately, it is within our own lives where the presence of capitalism and the spectacle is directly felt but habitually ignored. The willingness to submit oneself to spectacular tendencies is the unwillingness to relate to, depend on, and recognize others. Socially, we are spectators. Individually, we live in secrecy and isolation. “Generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most vital operation.”<sup>289</sup> We cannot bear to expose ourselves, to be vulnerable, and to open ourselves to others. Living in secrecy does not necessarily mean that we have secrets to keep, but is telling of our incapacity to relate to each other because we do not want to risk the comfort of autonomous existence. When human lives become the sphere of secrecy, the spectacle becomes the place of revelation, the realm of up-to-date information, the latest news, and exposed secrets. Therefore, nothing is revealed, “news of what is genuinely important, of what is changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts,”<sup>290</sup> and yet it feels like nothing is hidden. There are no further reasons to know and learn more about others outside of our pre-constructed spectacular reality consisting of images and representations. “Sitting in the car next to our spouse, we complete ignore her because we think that we already know everything about her and that there is nothing interesting to learn about her anymore.”<sup>291</sup>

Since we no longer see the need for other people, what complements the life of secrecy is the life of isolation. Despite the façade of globalization and community of the current age, likely in no other historical period humans as lonely as we are now. Even in the case of the lover and his beloved, when two people are face to face, they may not recognize one another. Although we have to admit that the failure to achieve mutual recognition is a natural tendency of self-

---

<sup>289</sup> Debord, G. and Imrie, M. (2010) *Comments on the society of the spectacle*. 3rd edn. London: Verso Books, Section 5.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, Section 5.

<sup>291</sup> T.N. Hanh, *Understanding Our Mind*, 54.

consciousness, a tendency of human beings in general, spectacular capitalism turns this tendency into actuality. Capitalism and the society of the spectacle is where disregarding others is not only viable but also encouraged. It is the mutual interest of the master of labor, the wage-laborer and spectators alike to maintain this isolation to eliminate contradictions and crises which may threaten the smooth operation of society and interactions between individuals.

*The reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isolation, and they contribute to that same isolation. From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender "lonely crowds." With ever-increasing concreteness the spectacle recreates its own presuppositions.*<sup>292</sup>

This deep sense of loneliness and isolation, far from being the natural condition of humans as social beings, is a result of our choices and actions in regard to how we view our own relationships with other people. "This relation has no basis in natural history, nor does it have a social basis common to all periods of human history. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older formations of social production."<sup>293</sup> The world seems hostile to us because we are hostile to the world. As a result, "Though separated from what they produce, people nevertheless produce every detail of their world with ever-increasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life."<sup>294</sup>

When what we have created is a world that can only be looked at, there is no longer a need to work in order to realize one's dialectical understanding of reality. Work is no longer seen

---

<sup>292</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 28

<sup>293</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 273.

<sup>294</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 33.

as “the eternal natural condition of human existence...The process of labour is nothing but work itself, viewed at the moment of its creative activity.”<sup>295</sup> It is the notion of work as creative activity that we have lost and forgotten. “What we are confronted by here is the *alienation* of man from his own labour.”<sup>296</sup> The loss of work is experienced by both the laborer and the capitalist. For the laborer, the fact that he has to sell his own labor-power signifies the loss of the real existence of the world and himself. The wage-laborer is simply absorbed under “the commands of capital.”<sup>297</sup> Likewise, the master of labor, as the agent of capital, has given up his capacity to work and merely becomes an instrument for capital. “And in fact it is no more than the rationalized motive and aim of the hoarder—a highly impoverished and abstract content which makes it plain that the capitalist is just as enslaved by the relationships of capitalism as is his opposite pole, the worker, albeit in a quite different manner.”<sup>298</sup> Both the wage-laborer and the capitalist, in their submission to capitalism, are identical to Unhappy Consciousness when it surrenders its own ability to self-create through work to the priest.

*In the mediator, then, this consciousness frees itself from action and enjoyment so far as they are regarded as its own. As a separate, independent extreme, it rejects the essence of its own will, and casts upon the mediator or minister [priest] its own freedom of decision, and herewith the responsibility for its own action. This mediator, having a direct relationship with unchangeable Being, ministers by giving advice on what is right. The action, since it follows upon the decision of someone else, ceases, as regards the doing or the willing of it, to be its own. But there is still left to the unessential consciousness the objective aspect, viz. the fruit of its labour, and its enjoyment. These, therefore, it rejects as well, and just as it renounces its will, so it renounces the actuality it received in work and enjoyment.*<sup>299</sup>

---

<sup>295</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 998.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid, 990.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid, 989.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid, 990.

<sup>299</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 136-137.

Instead of work, capitalism and the society of the spectacle is the epitome of non-work. Hence the law of capitalism is “*Productivity of labour* in general = the *maximum of profit* with the minimum work.”<sup>300</sup> Commodities and images achieve their autonomy respectively in the form of capital and spectacle. The laborer realizes his complete autonomy as a consumer or part of the leisure class. “The consistent upholders of the mistaken theory that surplus-value has its origin in a nominal rise of prices or in the privilege which the seller has of selling too dear assume therefore that there exists a class of buyers who do not sell, i.e. a class of consumers who do not produce.”<sup>301</sup>

The spectator’s work is not to work. As a non-worker, his entire existence revolves around the aversion to work which only adds to his imagined notion of autonomy. “Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague.”<sup>302</sup> Work is not something people want to do, as a natural activity of life, but it becomes something that people feel like they are forced to do because creative labor is now estranged, or wage-labor. “The worker therefore only feels himself outside of his work, and in his work feels outside himself. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*.”<sup>303</sup> The assumption is the less work one has to do, the less one can actually be productive on things that matter such as go on vacations, take up a hobby, or just relax.

*Due to the very success of this separate production of separation, the fundamental experience that in earlier societies was associated with people’s primary work is in the process of being replaced (in sectors near the cutting edge of the system’s evolution) by an identification of life with*

---

<sup>300</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 1037.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid, 264.

<sup>302</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 74.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid, “Estranged Labour”, 74.

*nonworking time, with inactivity. But such inactivity is in no way liberated from productive activity. It remains dependent on it, in an uneasy and admiring submission to the requirements and consequences of the production system. It is itself one of the products of that system. There can be no freedom apart from activity, and within the spectacle activity is nullified — all real activity having been forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle. Thus, what is referred to as a “liberation from work,” namely the modern increase in leisure time, is neither a liberation within work itself nor a liberation from the world shaped by this kind of work. None of the activity stolen through work can be regained by submitting to what that work has produced.*<sup>304</sup>

When we identify our life with nonworking time and inactivity, we get caught into this paradox that Debord mentions above. We have to work more in order for us not to work. This is the opposite of the non-action mindset which is not doing so one can do everything—the non-worker does everything to do nothing. “A general working rule of the integrated spectacle, at least for those who manage its affairs, is that, *everything which can be done, must be done.*”<sup>305</sup> For average wage-laborers, the goal is commonly to find a stable job and to earn enough money so that, when they are satisfied with the amount of wealth that they possess, they can then enjoy their leisure in whatever forms they can conceive them in. But that is not the case. Since labor-power is the only thing that the laborer has that is worthwhile for a capitalistic society, the wage-laborer is never paid enough to actually get out of the workforce. The wage-laborer is paid just enough only for subsistence, minimum-wage, so he can continue his existence as a wage-laborer and the source of surplus-value for capital.

*The cost of production of simple labour power, therefore amounts to the cost of existence and reproduction of the worker. The price of this cost of existence and reproduction constitutes wages. Wages so determined are called the wage minimum. This wage minimum, like the determination of the price of commodities by the cost of production in general, does not hold good for the single individual but for the species. Individual workers, millions of workers, do not get enough to be able to exist and reproduce*

<sup>304</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 27.

<sup>305</sup> Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Section 29.

*themselves; but the wages of the whole working class level down, within their fluctuations, to this minimum.*<sup>306</sup>

But the ideal of the non-working life, the life of leisure, is still at the forefront for the wage-laborer. Leisure, not necessarily pleasure, as a way to way to escape his alienation, dangles in front of his face like a carrot in front of a mule. For that reason, the wage-laborer keeps returning to the capitalist and sells his labor-power hoping that one day he can overcome his alienated condition. Being a consumer and part of the leisure class does not necessarily mean that one is a seeker of pleasure. Rather, it points back to an abstract need of self-consciousness to be in a permanent state of communion with itself. Even the wage-laborer who really is working—in order to keep himself alive—is nonetheless fundamentally motivated by the desire for autonomy.

It is also the rejection of work that a capitalist is a capitalist and the reason for why he seeks out wage-laborers. That is why other commodities do not interest the capitalist as much as labor-power. “...by incorporating living labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to ‘work’, ‘as if its body were by love possessed’.”<sup>307</sup> His job is to fine-tune capital so it can run more efficiently and making sure that his capital is productive at all time. The capitalist thinks that the more he invests into his capital, the less he himself has to work and all he has to do is to watch the capital valorizes itself. In the capitalist’s eyes, capital is something that is alive, “It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs.”<sup>308</sup> Capital is the capitalist’s relief from the world and the promised return to autonomy. “Only then will he be relieved of the need to work directly himself and be content with himself as the *capitalist*, i.e., as supervisor and

---

<sup>306</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels*, 206.

<sup>307</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 302.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid*, 255.

director of the process, as a mere function, as it were, endowed with consciousness and will, of the capital engaged in the process of valorizing itself.”<sup>309</sup> That is why he has to be certain that capital is constantly running and producing by feeding more labor-power to this seemingly living entity.

*...and the capitalist, who exists only as a potential purchaser of labour, becomes a real capitalist only when the worker, who can be turned into a wage-labourer only through the sale of his capacity for labour, really does submit to the commands of capital. The functions fulfilled by the capitalist are no more than the functions of capital—viz. the valorization of value by absorbing living labour—executed consciously and willingly. The capitalist functions only as personified capital, capital as a person.*<sup>310</sup>

The wage-laborer and the capitalist share the mentality of non-work. Both sides really want to escape the world and return to the state of autonomy. Yet, this creates a vicious cycle that keeps them both sides trapped within the world. Because of the desire for leisure, or the sphere of abstract autonomy, the laborer turns his labor-power into a commodity for sale and exchanges it for wage. In turn, the capitalist, whose instinctive task is to keep capital running, always has access to a readily available reserve of wage-laborers which only serves to pull the capitalist back to the task of acquiring additional labor-power. That is why Marx makes the comparison between the capitalist and the hoarder. The capitalist, like the hoarder, has an irresistible impulse to accumulate. The hoarder searches for value while the capitalist's interests lie in surplus-value. Both cases resemble showing candy to a child. The child cannot help but wants it. Under capitalism, the wage-laborer and the capitalist keep each other in chains.

The wage-laborer and the capitalist are polar opposites of each other but, in the end, since they both shared the ideal of non-work, the direction they are both heading is the same which is

---

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 1022.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid, 989.

towards a highly technological and automated world. “Automation...the most advanced sector of modern industry and the epitome of its practice.”<sup>311</sup> For capital to be an autonomous, self-valorized entity is for it to be automatic and to run itself without external inputs. The real subsumption of labor under capital brings about the need to turn anything into “an automaton...a moving power that move itself.”<sup>312</sup> As such, the machine represents the pinnacle of all that is automatic. “The means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the *machine*, or rather, an *automatic system of machinery* (system of machinery: the *automatic* one is merely its most complete, most adequate form, and alone transforms into a system).”<sup>313</sup>

The machine, as a form, is not to be viewed merely as a mechanical object but things that are automatic and made so that they have self-moving power. If images and representations are the primitive forms of the spectacle, then the machine form is the most advanced. When one is looking at an image or cognizing a representation, it is only an aspect of oneself that is reflected. For example, an image of his lover reflects something about his love life or the representation of democracy reflects something about his political stance. But the spectacle of the machine is the reflection of the spectator’s own humanity, his capacity for work, and, therefore, everything about him. In the presence of the system of machinery, it is absolutely spectacular because there is nothing left to add or take away. The spectator’s humanity, his being as a worker, is already right there in front of him.

*In no way does the machine appear as the individual worker's means of labour. Its distinguishing characteristic is not in the least, as with the means of labour, to transmit the worker's activity to the object; this activity, rather, is posited in such a way that it merely transmits the machine's work, the machine's action, on to the raw material — supervises*

---

<sup>311</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 45.

<sup>312</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 692.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid*, 692.



*it and guards against interruptions. Not as with the [693] instrument, which the worker animates and makes into his organ with his skill and strength, and whose handling therefore depends on his virtuosity. Rather, it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it; and it consumes coal, oil etc. (matières instrumentales), just as the worker consumes food, to keep up its perpetual motion. The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself.<sup>314</sup>*

With the machine, as the embodiment of non-work in place of work, the contradictions that were faced by Unhappy Consciousness (immediate and beyond), the wage-laborer (personal and social), and of the schizophrenic (reality and fantasy) in the sphere of Life are now resolved through inversion, from the sphere of life to the sphere of death represented by the system of machinery. “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only sucking living labour and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”<sup>315</sup> Capitalism and the society of the spectacle, as the inversion of life into death, is, in truth, the inversion of the entire world.

*According, then, to the law of this inverted world, what is like in the first world is unlike to itself, and what is unlike in the first world equally unlike to itself, or it becomes like itself. Expressed in determinate moments, this means that what in the law of the first world is sweet, in this inverted in-itself is sour, what in the former is black is, in the other, white. What in the law of the first in the north pole of the magnet is, in its other, supersensible in-itself [viz. in the earth], the south pole; but what is there south pole here is north pole. Similarly, what in the first law is the oxygen pole of electricity becomes in its other, supersensible essence, hydrogen pole; and conversely, what is there the hydrogen pole becomes here the oxygen pole. In another sphere, revenge on an enemy is, according to immediate law, the supreme satisfaction of the injured individuality. This law, however, which bids me confront him as himself a person who does not treat me as such, and in fact bids me destroy him as an individuality—this law is turned round by the principle of the other world into its opposite: the*

---

<sup>314</sup> Ibid, 692-693.

<sup>315</sup> Marx, *Capital* Vol.1, 342.

*reinstatement of myself as a person through the destruction of the alien individuality is turned into self-destruction. If, now, this inversion, which finds expression in the punishment of the crime, is made into a law, it, too, again is only the law of one world which is confronted by an inverted supersensible world where what is despised in the former is honoured, and what in the former is honoured, meets with contempt. The punishment which under the law of the first world disgraces and destroys a man, is transformed in its inverted world into the pardon which preserves his essential being and brings him to honour.*<sup>316</sup>

It seems like when Hegel describes the idea of the inverted world, he seems to be taking a theoretical approach in order to get us to understand the movement of the dialectic, as the interdependent relations between opposites. The inverted world described in the passage above is still within the realm of possibility. But now that we have arrived at the real subsumption of labour under capital in the society of the spectacle, the inverted world is now the actual world. Everything for the wage-laborer has been turned upside down. “Hence the rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over man, of dead labour over living labour, of the product over the producer.”<sup>317</sup> Likewise, the spectator who can no longer differentiate between what is true and what is false. “The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: “What appears is good; what is good appears.” The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply.”<sup>318</sup> The spectator does not even have to do anything. To act, even to think in a dialectical way, is discouraged if not prohibited.

*The flow of images carries everything before it, and it is similarly someone else who controls at will this simplified summary of the sensible world; who decides where the flow will lead as well as the rhythm of what should be shown, like some perpetual, arbitrary surprise, leaving no time for*

---

<sup>316</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 97.

<sup>317</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 990.

<sup>318</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 12.

*reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it.*<sup>319</sup>

To live is to live in passivity, in non-work, in secrecy and isolation. Even if the world right now appears to us as chaotic, unstable, and full of activities, they are merely illusions of the flow of images and the circulation of commodities which are supported by an underlying lifelessness. It is the dream of life imagined by those who are asleep.

If to continue living is to be passive and embrace death, the repudiation of life now becomes a sign of vitality. The schizophrenic, who cannot bear to continue to rely on the crutches of drugs, treatments, therapies, psychologists, psychiatrists, who understands that those things can give him a life but a life that is a lie, the only course of action he feels like he can take is to commit suicide.

*There are fine but important distinctions between wanting to be dead, wanting to die, and wanting to kill yourself. Most people have from time to time wished to be dead, null, beyond sorrow...many want to die, to undertake the active changes from where they are, to be freed from the affliction of consciousness. To want to kill yourself, however, requires a whole extra level of passion and a certain directed violence. Suicide is not the result of passivity; it is the result of an action taken. It requires a great deal of energy and a strong will in addition to a belief in the permanence of the present bad moment and at least a touch of impulsively.*<sup>320</sup>

It is not a moment of cowardice but it is the need to take action and suicide is the only action left that can be taken. This is not only for the schizophrenic but for all consciousnesses in general. Hegel says in the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, “In this element of the will is rooted in my ability to free myself from everything, abandon every aim, abstract from everything. The human being alone can sacrifice everything, his life included; he can commit suicide.”<sup>321</sup> Suicide is not

<sup>319</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 10.

<sup>320</sup> Solomon, *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*, 244.

<sup>321</sup> Hegel, G.W.F.W.F., Knox, T.M., Houlgate, S. and Gethin, R. (2008) *Outlines of the philosophy of right*. Edited by Oxford University Press Staff. New York: Oxford University Press, 29.

something that one should do since it is still motivated by the false desire for autonomy but, in the inverted world, it may appear the only thing that one can do as a way to hold on to this active and, to a certain extent, creative independence. The only other option is to retreat back into passivity and be content with abstract self-certainty, a step back for consciousness.

It is the same for the capitalistic and spectacular society, it still exists because it embraces dead labor and the ideals of the system of machinery. But, when society actually does something, when it decides to be active, it is always something that will eventually lead to its own death. Such is the case for every aspects of society including politics and even the sciences.

*Generalised secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis, as its most vital operation.*

*The simple fact of being unanswerable has given what is false an entirely new quality. At a stroke it is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis. Unanswerable lies have succeeded in eliminating public opinion, which first lost the ability to make itself heard and then very quickly dissolved altogether. This evidently has significant consequences for politics, the applied sciences, the legal system and the arts.<sup>322</sup>*

This is not necessarily a result of malicious intent but the natural outcome of a series of decisions supported by our own ignorance. And, true to what Hegel says about the inverted world, ultimately, both individuals and society are building a world that is waiting to self-destruct.

*The manufacture of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries. Meanwhile news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and*

---

<sup>322</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 5.

*starts. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages in its programmed self-destruction.*<sup>323</sup>

Because of the fact that to act fast now would only quickens the process of self-destruction. Debord warns, "A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must *know how to wait*."<sup>324</sup> And it is this willingness to wait, the capacity for patience, is how we can invert this inversion and helps us to overcome self-destruction which, if allowed to continue, seems inevitable. However, patience is what the *Tao Te Ching* advocates in times of turmoil and chaos, when the water is murky and unclear. One must wait until the murkiness settles down and the water itself will become clear. When things are cleared, we know what to do. Patience and the ability to wait is the topic for the next chapter.

*Who can wait quietly while the mud settles?  
Who can remain still until the moment of action?  
Observers of the Tao do not seek fulfilment.  
Not seeking fulfillment, they are not swayed by desire for change.*<sup>325</sup>

---

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, Section 5.

<sup>324</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Section 220.

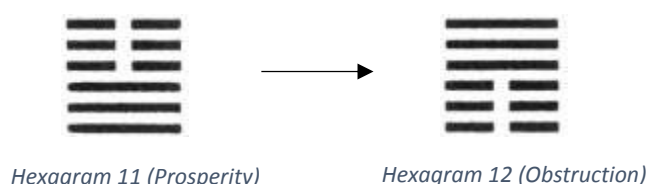
<sup>325</sup> Feng, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 15.

## **Chapter 3: Infinity and Patience**

*So, bhikkhus, if Sakka, lord of the devas, subsisting on the fruit of his own merit, exercising supreme sovereignty and rulership over the Tāvātimsa devas, will be one who speaks in praise of patience and gentleness, then how much more would it be fitting here for you, who have gone forth in such a well-expounded Dhamma and Discipline, to be patient and gentle.*

(SN 11.4)

In chapter 2, we determined that spectacular and capitalistic society is a world that is in the process of inverting, turning inside out. The *I-Ching* (*The Classic of Changes*) portrays this movement as the transition from hexagram 11 (Prosperity) to hexagram 12 (Obstruction).



The descriptions and the symbols of the hexagrams provide us with judgements that are both appropriate and relevant to our actual experience of the world. Looking at hexagram 11, when the world is prosperous, harmonious, and peaceful, people work together and depend on one another. Wang Bi's commentary on the *I Ching* emphasizes that peace and harmony are based on mutual, interdependent relationships between different members of society.

*When one pulls the rush plant, it pulls up other of the same kind together with it, so if one goes forth and acts, there will be good fortune. {The rush plant is such that when one pulls it up by its roots, it pulls up others connected to it. The word ru [pull up] refers to the way things get pulled up together. Here the three yang [connected] lines share the same aim, for all have fixed it on the outer [upper] trigram. The first line is the leader of its kind, so when it initiates, so when it initiates action, the others follow, just like the rush plants that get pulled up together. The lines of the upper*

*trigram respond compliantly and do not become disobedient or contrary, so when the yang lines advance, all of them achieve their purpose. This is why to go forth and act here with others of the same kind means that "there will be good fortune."}*<sup>326</sup>

The inversion of hexagram 11 is hexagram 12, which might be taken to symbolize the inverted world of the spectacular and capitalistic society. The opposite, or inverted, world of hexagram 12 is filled with corruption, instability and conflicts. Where hexagram 11 shows how members of society depend and rely upon one another to establish harmony and peace, hexagram 12 says that what is rotten at the core is the separation of people and things from one another.

*Heaven and Earth do not interact: this is the image of Obstruction. In the same way, the noble man holds back the practice of his virtue and thus avoids disaster. He must not allow himself to be honored with rank and salary.*<sup>327</sup>

But neither the state of prosperity nor the state of obstruction are permanent. The transition between prosperity and obstruction, since they are the inverse of one another, is like a pendulum swing. When the pendulum reaches the highest point, it returns to the other side by its own momentum. This applies to every phenomenon in the world. All things are impermanent and constantly changing.

*The Master said: "To get into danger is a matter of thinking one's position secure; to become ruined is a matter of thinking one's continuance protected; to fall into disorder is a matter of thinking one's order enduring. Therefore the noble man when secure does not forget danger, when enjoying continuance does not forget ruin, when maintaining order does not forget disorder. This is the way his person is kept secure and his state remains protected. The Changes say: 'This might be lost, this might be lost, so tie it to a healthy, flourishing mulberry.'"*<sup>328</sup>

---

<sup>326</sup> Lynn, R.J. and Bi, W. (1994) *The classic of changes: A new translation of the I Ching as interpreted by Wang bi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 206.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, 83.

When the fool is in the position of prosperity, he assumes that prosperity will last forever, and the same when he faces hardships. By contrast, the wise man understands that reality is always changing and moving, and lives life accordingly.

It is important to keep in mind the impermanent nature of things in order to recognize the impermanence of capitalism itself. Marx says that capitalism at its advanced stage occupies a unique place in the development of history. Under capitalism's real subsumption, work and labor are not merely dominated by capital but revolutionized and transformed by it. "This [formal subsumption] stands in striking contrast to the development of a *specifically capitalist mode of production* (large-scale industry, etc.) [real subsumption]; the latter not only transforms the situations of the various agents of production, it also *revolutionizes* their actual mode of labour and the real nature of the labour process as a whole."<sup>329</sup> Spectacular capitalism is a particular and hence specific phase of history. It is recent in comparison to the whole of history; it is therefore difficult to compare with what came before, and to predict what will come after. Nonetheless, being a moment of history, it is subject to change.

Spectacular capitalism seems permanent, impervious to the constantly changing world. It is new and recent and yet familiar enough to appear as common sense. Whether one is for or against capitalism, the consensus is that spectacular capitalism is here to stay. It presents itself as invulnerable and infallible, free from challenges and oppositions. Since spectacular capitalism is our own creation, to believe that it is permanent and cannot change or be changed is self-deception. This illusion of permanence enables spectacular capitalism to not only survive but to eliminate any opposition.

---

<sup>329</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 1021.



*The spectacle is a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws. Consumable survival must constantly expand because it never ceases to include privation. If augmented survival never comes to a resolution, if there is no point where it might stop expanding, this is because it is itself stuck in the realm of privation. It may gild poverty, but it cannot transcend it.<sup>330</sup>*

If spectacular capitalism appears permanent it is not because it has truly transcended history and the effects of time. Spectacular capitalism transforms our own perception of history and time.

*The spectacle, considered as the reigning society's method for paralyzing history and memory and for suppressing any history based on historical time, represents a false consciousness of time.<sup>331</sup>*

In actuality, however, it is more accurate to say that we ourselves change our views of time and history in order to accommodate our perceptions of spectacular capitalism as an autonomous, self-valorized system. We change ourselves from dialectical, historical, and dependent beings to autonomous, ahistorical, and isolated entities in conformity with spectacular capitalism. Thus, we view capitalism as permanent. However, Debord shows that man's relation to nature and others is fundamentally historical.

*Man, "the negative being who is solely to the extent that he suppresses being," is identical with time. Man's appropriation of his own nature is at the same time his grasp of the development of the universe. "History is itself a real part of natural history, of the transformation of nature into man" (Marx). Conversely, this "natural history" exists effectively only through the process of human history, the only vantage point from which one can take in that historical totality, like the modern telescope whose power enables us to look back in time at the receding nebulas at the periphery of the universe.<sup>332</sup>*

In other words, it is the dialectical process of working consciousness transforming reality and, in turn, being transformed by it that makes history, the experience of time and being human. "The

---

<sup>330</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 44.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, Section 158.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid, Section 125.

natural basis of time, the concrete experience of its passage, becomes human and social by existing *for humanity*.<sup>333</sup> Working consciousness needs to “*live* the historical time that it produces” and, in turn, it “discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and each previously defeated attempt to carry out this project represents a possible point of departure for a new historical life.”<sup>334</sup> We to have accept and live with the consequences of our actions; for us, this is spectacular capitalism. Although spectacular capitalism seems alienating and out of reach, it is our creation. “Though separated from what they produce, people nevertheless produce every detail of their world with ever-increasing power. They thus also find themselves increasingly separated from that world. The closer their life comes to being their own creation, the more they are excluded from that life.”<sup>335</sup>

Because we produce spectacular capitalism we can change it. However, when we work unconsciously to actualize spectacular capitalism as an autonomous and self-moving reality, spectacular capitalism, in turn, actualizes us as non-historical beings. As spectators, we deny our responsibility for creating it, even as we respond with “an uneasy and admiring submission to the requirements and consequences of the production system.”<sup>336</sup> As a result, spectacular capitalism appears to have a monopoly over history and time. “This devalued time is the complete opposite of time as “terrain of human development.”<sup>337</sup> It is the terrain of non-work for consciousness, and the appearance of work for capital and the spectacle. Spectacular capitalism asserts that there is no time and history outside of capital and the spectacle, that time and history is on its side.

---

<sup>333</sup> Ibid, Section 163.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid, Section 143.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid, Section 33.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid, Section 27.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid, Section 147.

There is no time but “time spent consuming images” and in “the consumption of time”<sup>338</sup> itself. It follows that there cannot be anything, including humanity, outside of spectacular capitalism. Because history and time, for Marx and Debord, constitute human nature, and since spectacular capitalism would monopolize history and time, to venture outside the spectacle seems like suicide. We view history through the prism of spectacular capitalism rather than seeing spectacular capitalism as historical.

As a result, even though spectacular capitalism is damaging to us, it appears inescapable. If the autonomy of the commodity furnishes the inner world of spectacular experience, its contents, then the distortion of history and time is its outer boundary. We cannot escape spectacular capitalism through spectacular means. The only way out that the spectacle offers denies our historical nature. It has conditioned us to think we are not responsible for our reality and makes us suppose that we can never participate in it. Many who acknowledge problems with capitalism and the spectacle would escape into realms such as literature, music, and religion as safe havens that transcend the corruptions of life. The outlets need not be spectacular, but they become so when they are viewed unhistorically. “What is presented as true life turns out to be merely a more *truly spectacular* life.”<sup>339</sup> They can become spectacular means of retreat for those who have given up.

Others would even feign to attack the spectacle from a place of security, as spectators. “The end of the history of culture manifests itself in two opposing forms: the project of culture’s self-transcendence within total history, and its preservation as a dead object for spectacular

---

<sup>338</sup> Ibid, Section 153

<sup>339</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 153.

contemplation.”<sup>340</sup> History and time can only be “portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, *at a distance*.”<sup>341</sup> We create the spectacle as our object of contemplation. Debord sees this tendency in the arts, especially with avant garde movements. We might think of the arts and artists as models of creativity, opposed to spectacular passivity. This is not necessarily the case. Spectacular contemplation presents the illusion of revolution.

*Dadaism and Surrealism were the two currents that marked the end of modern art. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they were contemporaries of the last great offensive of the revolutionary proletarian movement, and the defeat of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere whose decrepitude they had denounced, was the fundamental reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and Surrealism were historically linked yet also opposed to each other. This opposition involved the most important and radical contributions of the two movements, but it also revealed the internal inadequacy of their one-sided critiques. Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it; Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it.*<sup>342</sup>

Followers of the avant garde see themselves as counter-cultural and standing outside of the prevailing culture. So, for the avant garde, the outcomes are twofold. It can be self-elimination like Dadaism, which “sought to abolish art without realizing it”—it opposed spectacular capitalism by ineffectually removing itself. Conversely, Surrealism “sought to realize art without abolishing it.” Although it professed to go against the status-quo, it often did so by following the rules of spectacular capitalism. The avant garde’s overcoming is like a game. They would either win the game by refusing to play, or by playing, ratify the spectacle. The illusion of revolt leads artists to vainglorious complacency.

*Art in its period of dissolution — a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived — is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the*

---

<sup>340</sup> Ibid, Section 184.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid, Section 153.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid, Section 191.

*impossibility of change. The more grandiose its pretensions, the further from its grasp is its true fulfillment. This art is necessarily avant-garde, and at the same time it does not actually exist. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.*<sup>343</sup>

Art is not the only case. For Marx philosophy is a prime example of this self-defeating and hypocritical tendency. Philosophers, like avant garde artists, imagine themselves changing and transforming the world while remaining within the comfort of their own thoughts, concepts, and theories.

*Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men (just as the Old Hegelians declared them the true bonds of human society) it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness. Since, according to their fantasy, the relationships of men, all their doings, their chains and their limitations are products of their consciousness, the Young Hegelians logically put to men the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness, and thus of removing their limitations. This demand to change consciousness amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way, i.e. to recognise it by means of another interpretation. The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly "world-shattering" statements, are the staunchest conservatives. The most recent of them have found the correct expression for their activity when they declare they are only fighting against "phrases." They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world. The only results which this philosophic criticism could achieve were a few (and at that thoroughly one-sided) elucidations of Christianity from the point of view of religious history; all the rest of their assertions are only further embellishments of their claim to have furnished, in these unimportant elucidations, discoveries of universal importance.*

*It has not occurred to any one of these philosophers to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings.*<sup>344</sup>

---

<sup>343</sup> Ibid, Section 190.

<sup>344</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "The German Ideology", 149.

Debord adds a contemporary coda. “The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality, reducing everyone’s concrete life to a universe of *speculation*.”<sup>345</sup>

Avant garde artists and philosophers, like all spectators, remove themselves from history and time. We accept the permanence of the way things are, refusing to live with the historical time that we produce. The only apparent escapes from the spectacle are its ever more radical manifestations. The spectacle and capital inevitably increase our separation. Frontal assault only strengthens the spectacle and its hold on us. It is like pulling out the rug that we are standing on. Spectacular capitalism only grows; it does not hide from such assaults but actually welcomes them. “The critical concept of “the spectacle” can also undoubtedly be turned into one more hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric used to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract*, thus serving to reinforce the spectacular system.”<sup>346</sup>

It seems we are left with no place to go from here. We have reached an impasse. What emancipation is possible when spectacular capitalism has transformed the way we understand change itself or, in other words, our perception of history and time? It culminates in our rejection of ourselves as historical and temporal beings. That is why revolutions, as catalysts for change, fail. To revolt without critically and practically embodying the nature of change is for revolution to undermine itself and become its own worst enemy. “Revolutionary theory is now the enemy of all revolutionary ideology, and it knows it.”<sup>347</sup> Being critical is more than just making criticisms and pointing out flaws. Often when we are too engrossed in criticism, we cannot move forward. Marx sees his contemporaries as confined to merely intellectual criticism.

---

<sup>345</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 19.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid, Section 203.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid, Section 124.

*The Young-Hegelian ideologists, in spite of their allegedly “world-shattering” statements, are the staunchest conservatives. The most recent of them have found the correct expression for their activity when they declare they are only fighting against “phrases.” They forget, however, that to these phrases they themselves are only opposing other phrases, and that they are in no way combating the real existing world when they are merely combating the phrases of this world.*<sup>348</sup>

Work as critical activity is more than just an occupation with immediate problems; it is precisely the capacity to see alternatives to the current situation that is basic to critique. In conjunction with the critical aspect of work, the practical aspect of work is the process of bringing our visions into actuality. Only when these two aspects of work, critique and practice, are understood as integral to one another can we understand what Marx means when he says work, as practical-critical activity, is creative. That is why a discussion of history and time is necessary—not only because it might help us understand the paradoxical phenomenon we are facing, where the more we try to escape spectacular capitalism the stronger it gets, but also because it might help us see a possibility for change and understand how to bring it about.

The Buddha teaches that nature has three marks:

**Non-self** [*anatta*], meaning there is no independent, autonomous self that we can identify ourselves or others with.

*At Sāvattthī. Sitting to one side, the Venerable Rādha said to the Blessed One: “Venerable sir, it is said, ‘nonsself, nonsself.’ What now, venerable sir, is nonsself?”*

*“Form, Rādha, is nonsself, feeling is nonsself, perception is nonsself, volitional formations are nonsself, consciousness is nonsself. Seeing thus...He understands: ‘...there is no more for this state of being.’”*<sup>349</sup>

---

<sup>348</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “The German Ideology”, 149.

<sup>349</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 987.

**Suffering or dissatisfaction** [*dukkha*], meaning that there is nothing that one can cling to or desire;

*“Form, Rādha, is suffering, feeling is suffering, perception is suffering, volitional formations are suffering, consciousness is suffering. Seeing thus...He understands: ‘...there is no more for this state of being.’”*<sup>350</sup>

**Impermanence** [*anicca*], meaning everything is subject to change.

*“Form, Rādha, is impermanent. Feeling...Perception...Volitional formations...Consciousness is impermanent. Seeing thus...He understands: ‘...there is no more for this state of being.’”*<sup>351</sup>

Anything that exists or might exist has to possess these three characteristics. By recognizing the three marks of existence, one is said to have insight into the true nature of reality.

The spectacle, as the inversion of the true or the mere appearance and illusion of truth, poses itself as the inversion of the three marks of existence. First, the spectacle, like capital, appears as an independent and autonomous entity, having an intrinsic self.

*The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world has culminated in a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.*<sup>352</sup>

Second, the spectacle is to be accumulated.

*In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles.*<sup>353</sup>

Third, the spectacle appears permanent and eternally present. It is time that does not change.

---

<sup>350</sup> Ibid, 987.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid, 987.

<sup>352</sup> Debord, *The Society in the Spectacle*, Section 2.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, Section 1.



*The time of production — commodified time — is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals. It is irreversible time made abstract, in which each segment need only demonstrate by the clock its purely quantitative equality with all the others. It has no reality apart from its exchangeability. Under the social reign of commodified time, “time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the carcass of time” (The Poverty of Philosophy). This devalued time is the complete opposite of time as “terrain of human development.”*<sup>354</sup>

With the first and second characteristics, spectacular capitalism appears to assert itself as the natural master of reality. Not just the spectacle, but anything that we view as autonomous and desirable will naturally come to dominate us. Buddhism recognizes this in the case of the ignorant person who does not realize that pleasures and pains result from his own actions, but supposes they are external realities to get rid of or chase after.

*“Bhikkhus, when the uninstructed worldling is being contacted by a painful feeling, he sorrows, grieves, and laments; he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught...”*

*“Being contacted by that same painful feeling, he harbours aversion towards it. When he harbours aversion towards painful feeling, the underlying tendency to aversion towards feeling lies behind this. Being contacted by painful feeling, he seeks delight in sensual pleasure. For what reason? Because the uninstructed worldling does know of any escape from pain feeling other than sensual pleasure, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feeling lies behind this...”*<sup>355</sup>

As spectators we also lack agency, while seeking the autonomy promised by the spectacle. So we submit to it, unaware that it is our own construction; the spectacle, our own creation, holds us in bondage. The producer becomes the product, the master becomes the slave. “The triumph of this separation-based economic system *proletarianizes* the whole world.”<sup>356</sup> It is this ignorance of the fact that we are enslaving ourselves even though we could be free which is at the heart of suffering. “Man is directly a *natural* being. As a natural being and as a living natural being he is on the one hand furnished with *natural powers of life*—he is an *active* natural being...On the

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, Section 147.

<sup>355</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 1264.

<sup>356</sup> Debord, *The Society the Spectacle*, Section 26.

other hand, as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited creature...<sup>357</sup> We impose on ourselves those limitations and conditions, hence they are real and actual. But because we are active and working creatures, those limitations and conditions are never fixed. We are capable of alienation and inhumanity but we are also capable of liberation and humanity. To be human is not something that is given and can be taken for granted. We always have to work for it.

Thus the third characteristic of spectacular capitalism, its pretension to permanence, is the most harmful. It affirms suffering, alienation and inhumanity as natural and therefore permanent in our lives. The problems deepen when we take what is inhuman to be naturally human. At a personal level, when we are exposed long enough to anything, we begin to identify with it as part of our natural identity. We cannot imagine ourselves otherwise. Such things appear natural not because they are actually the way things are, whether good or bad, but because of our identification with them.

*“These eight worldly conditions, monks, keep the world turning around, and the world turns around these eight worldly conditions. What eight? Gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain.*

*“When an uninstructed worldling, monks, comes upon gain, he does not reflect on it thus: ‘This gain has come to me is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change.’ He does not know it as it really is. And when he comes upon loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain keep his mind engrossed. When gain comes he is elated and when he meets with loss he is dejected. When fame comes is elated and when he meets with disrepute he is dejected. When praise comes he is elated and when he meets with blame he is dejected. When he experiences pleasure he is elated and when he experiences pain he is dejected. Being thus involved in likes and dislikes, he will not be freed from birth, aging, and death. From sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair; he will not be freed from suffering, I say.”<sup>358</sup>*

<sup>357</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Readers*, “Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic and Philosophy as a Whole”, 115.

<sup>358</sup> Bodhi, B. (2005) *In the Buddha’s words: An anthology of discourses from the Pali canon*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, U.S., 33.

On a historical level, Cyril Smith describes what it means to view spectacular capitalism as natural life. “The fact that we go on living inhumanly shows that we look at the world in ways which make this inhumanity seem somehow ‘natural’ and inevitable.”<sup>359</sup> This is a crucial component for spectacular capitalism because “it serves as a necessary pseudo-justification for a counterfeit life.”<sup>360</sup> John Welwood, in his book *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, discusses how a person under psychological distress maintains and perpetuates her problem by constructing stories as a means for justification, instead of trying to improve her condition.

*One of the main ways we try to hold our identity together is by developing an elaborate web of rationalizations—stories about the way we are or the way reality is—to justify our denial and avoidance. A story in this sense is a mental interpretation of our experience, a way of organizing our beliefs into an overall view of reality. Such stories may not be entirely conscious. Often they are more like dreams, consisting of subconscious imaginings and expectations.*

*For example, a woman whose father had been remote in childhood had difficulty acknowledging her need for emotional contact. She justified her rejection of this need through a story she told herself: “Men are not emotionally available. Since you can never trust them, it would be foolish to ever let myself need a man.” When this woman was in a relationship, she would contract against her own need and hold herself back because she never wanted to be in such a vulnerable position again. As a result, men would always leave her because they couldn’t feel a real connection with her. And this reinforced her story, “You can never count on men to be there.”<sup>361</sup>*

In the same vein, for spectators, the existence of spectacular capitalism requires its own story. The narrative of spectacular capitalism must present itself as the natural realization of humanity and the truth of what it means to be human.

*The economy’s triumph as an independent power at the same time spells its own doom, because the forces it has unleashed have eliminated the economic necessity that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies.*

<sup>359</sup> Smith, C. (1996) *Marx at the millennium*. United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 73.

<sup>360</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 48.

<sup>361</sup> Welwood, J. (2002) *Toward a psychology of awakening: Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the path of personal and spiritual transformation*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 139.

*Replacing that necessity with a necessity for boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs (now scarcely met) with an incessant fabrication of pseudo-needs, all of which ultimately come down to the single pseudo-need of maintaining the reign of the autonomous economy. But that economy loses all connection with authentic needs insofar as it emerges from the social unconscious that unknowingly depended on it.*<sup>362</sup>

To make itself appear natural, spectacular capitalism represents time in two ways. “The limitations of human practice imposed by the various stages of labor have humanized time and also dehumanized it, in the forms of cyclical time and of the separated irreversible time of economic production.”<sup>363</sup> These two ways of looking at time existed before spectacular capitalism. More traditional societies, such as China and Egypt, exemplified cyclical or eternal time. In China and Egypt, the masters of history “long held a monopoly on the immortality of the soul.”<sup>364</sup> In Greece, irreversible or historical time, time as movement, emerges out of the cyclical realm of myth. “Historical time became conscious in Greece.”<sup>365</sup> Cyclical and historical time coexist in the Middle Ages. “The Middle Ages, an incomplete mythical world whose consummation lay outside itself, is the period when cyclical time, though still governing the major part of production, really begins to be undermined by history.”<sup>366</sup> The monotheistic religions of the Middle Ages are semihistorical.

*The monotheistic religions were a compromise between myth and history, between the cyclical time that still governed the sphere of production and the irreversible time that was the theater of conflicts and regroupings among different peoples. The religions that evolved out of Judaism were abstract universal acknowledgments of an irreversible time that had become democratized and open to all, but only in the realm of illusion. Time is totally oriented toward a single final event: “The Kingdom of God is coming soon.” These religions were rooted in the soil of history, but they remained radically opposed to history. The semihistorical religions*

<sup>362</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 51.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid, Section 163.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid, Section 132.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid, Section 134

<sup>366</sup> Ibid, Section 137.

*establish a qualitative point of departure in time (the birth of Christ, the flight of Mohammed), but their irreversible time — introducing an accumulation that would take the form of conquest in Islam and of increasing capital in Reformation Christianity — is inverted in religious thought and becomes a sort of countdown: waiting for time to run out before the Last Judgment and the advent of the other, true world. Eternity has emerged from cyclical time, as something beyond it. It is also the element that restrains the irreversibility of time, suppressing history within history itself by positioning itself on the other side of irreversible time as a pure point into which cyclical time returns and disappears. Bossuet will still say: “By way of time, which passes, we enter eternity, which does not pass.”<sup>367</sup>*

Like the monotheistic religions, spectacular capitalism combines irreversible and cyclical time. On the one hand it needs a narrative of irreversible progress leading to the appearance of spectacular capitalism. Spectacular capitalism has “to inspire the continued progression of that time by recording the past out of which it has developed.”<sup>368</sup> It must appear as a natural outcome of the long and arduous course of history, so that it does not appear as something imposed or forced. The spectacle presents itself as the triumph of progress. “The *owners of history* have given time a *direction*, a direction which is also a *meaning*.”<sup>369</sup>

This meaning is the second aspect of the spectacular narrative. Spectacular capitalism must have a direction that is not arbitrary. That is why, besides appearing as a linear progression, it must also appear cyclical. This cyclical appearance makes it possible to suppose that, notwithstanding the various modes of production and social relations throughout history, the underlying essence of those forms was always spectacular and capitalistic. “In itself, cyclical time is a time without conflict.”<sup>370</sup> Spectacular capitalism has to appear cyclical so as not to conflict with modes of production and social relations that existed before it. The message is that

---

<sup>367</sup> Ibid, Section 136.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid, Section 132.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid, Section 132.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid, Section 129.

spectacular capitalism was right there all along. Spectacular capitalism appears not an arbitrary presence but a necessary one.

When we put irreversible time and cyclical time together, the narrative of spectacular capitalism is complete. However, the spectacle takes a step further. Spectacular time is not semihistorical like the monotheistic religions, but pseudocyclical. “The general time of human nondevelopment also has a complementary aspect—a *consumable* form of time based on the present mode of production and manifesting itself in everyday life as a *pseudocyclical time*.”<sup>371</sup> Spectacular time is not the movement towards the end of history like monotheistic religions but it is the end of history that is in movement. As the inversion of semihistorical time, it is time that is seen as no longer historical. “Spectacular domination’s first priority was to eradicate historical knowledge in general; beginning with just about all rational information and commentary on the most recent past.”<sup>372</sup> The result is a narrative that already established the spectacle as the permanent end of history, and everything else serves to justify that fact. In other words, the spectacle goes beyond the semihistorical time of monotheistic religions by seemingly going beyond narrative and story altogether. The spectacle needs no justification because it asserts itself as fact.

*The precious advantage which the spectacle has acquired through the outlawing of history, from having driven the recent past into hiding, and from having made everyone forget the spirit of history within society, is above all the ability to cover its own tracks -- to conceal the very progress of its recent world conquest. Its power already seems familiar, as if it had always been there. All usurpers have shared this aim: to make us forget that they have only just arrived.*<sup>373</sup>

---

<sup>371</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 148.

<sup>372</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 6.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid*, Section 6.

For the semihistorical time of monotheistic religions, the end of history is the result of a historical movement and so it still requires a story or a myth to justify this reaching for the end. In pseudocyclical time, the end of history is at the beginning of the movement; thus its emphasis on the cyclical rather than the historical emphasis of semihistorical time. The conclusion comes at the beginning, not at the end. Spectacular time is consumable time, time as identical to our acts of consumption and of non-work. Consumption comes before work and labor. Spectacular time does not need a justification; it is the realm where we do need to wait to get into spectacular paradise. It is something that we experience now and not something to wait for like the Kingdom of God. The spectacle is the gate that can instantaneously transport us to the realm of enjoyment and consumption

Spectacular capitalism is “an eternal present” where one can “forget the past”<sup>374</sup> and never worry about the future. This is the logic of spectacular capitalism. The spectacle cannot be questioned, it “compels universal respect; it is no longer permitted to laugh at it.”<sup>375</sup> The spectacle is not imposed by overt violence. In China and the Soviet Union, emperors and dictators tried to overtly control history.

*How drastically any absolute power will suppress history depends on the extent of its imperious interests or obligations, and especially on its practical capacity to execute its aims. Ts'in Che Hoang Ti had books burned, but he never managed to get rid of all of them. In our own century Stalin went further, yet despite the various accomplices he managed to find outside his empire's borders, there remained a vast area of the world beyond the reach of his police, where his schemes could be ridiculed.*<sup>376</sup>

---

<sup>374</sup> Ibid, Section 5.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid, Section 6.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid, Section 6.

Despots could be ridiculed, but mockery cannot touch the spectacle. “In any case, it has become impossible to show that one is laughing.”<sup>377</sup> We do not question the spectacle because we never question our communion with ourselves as consumers, and so we never question it.

Underneath the cyclical appearance, history still moves though spectators are oblivious. History moves not as an extension of our own development, a movement reflecting our own movement. History subsumed under spectacular capitalism is merely the description of events happening to autonomous things and individuals on the newspaper or the television. History and time are viewed as absolutely external to the spectators themselves. It belongs not to our lives, but to archives. History originates in the chronicle. “The chronicle is the expression of the irreversible time of power.”<sup>378</sup> The medieval chronicles give way to the accumulation of big data. History is archived and stored-up, separate from the lives of spectators and their engagement with consumable time. Archiving allows “the forgetting of whatever has nonetheless been understood”<sup>379</sup> and history is something never to be bothered with again. Since history is hidden in the background, the spectacle appears to precede narratives and stories. Archived history becomes information to be controlled. This is how we deal with history within spectacular capitalism, and in so doing strengthen the spectacle.

*One aspect of the disappearance of all objective historical knowledge can be seen in the way that individual reputations have become malleable and alterable at will by those who control all information: information which is gathered and also -- an entirely different matter -- information which is broadcast. Their ability to falsify is thus unlimited. Historical evidence which the spectacle does not need to know ceases to be evidence.*<sup>380</sup>

---

<sup>377</sup> Ibid, Section 6.

<sup>378</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 132.

<sup>379</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 6.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid, Section 7.



Information or archived history must be falsified and manipulated repeatedly. Pseudocyclical time is not like the semihistorical monotheistic religions where one grand narrative or myth served as a unitary justification. Pseudocyclical time incessantly demands new narratives or myths as falsified information and self-deception. But even though new myths are constantly created, it is the same spectacular message every time, “the ceaseless circularity of information, always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries.”<sup>381</sup> Consequently, within the spectacle myths and narratives are not merely part of the religious or political sphere; every aspect of life is mythical. “The integrated spectacle... has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality.”<sup>382</sup> Therefore, the experience of pseudocyclical time is not a continuous, uninterrupted movement, as it appears on the surface. In actuality, the spectacle is a sequence of fragments and divided parts that happen over and over again because we repeatedly reproduce the spectacle only to return to it.

*These commodified moments are explicitly presented as moments of real life, whose cyclical return we are supposed to look forward to. But all that is really happening is that the spectacle is displaying and reproducing itself at a higher level of intensity.*<sup>383</sup>

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel calls this the one-sided infinity. “The progress to infinity is, consequently, only the perpetual repetition of one and the same content, one and the same tedious alternation...”<sup>384</sup> This sense of repetition promotes the illusion that spectacular capitalism is permanent. This is its maddening power, but it is also a sign of its fragility. Even though pseudocyclical time, posing as a natural fact, denies any narrative as the source of its origin, it always has to provide a new narrative every time it reproduces itself as “the promise of

---

<sup>381</sup> Ibid, Section 5.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid, Section 4.

<sup>383</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 153.

<sup>384</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 142.

some new disillusion to come.”<sup>385</sup> The spectacle must always give an explanation why we need the next best thing.

*The prestigiousness of mediocre objects of this kind is solely due to the fact that they have been placed, however briefly, at the center of social life and hailed as a revelation of the unfathomable purposes of production. But the object that was prestigious in the spectacle becomes mundane as soon as it is taken home by its consumer — at the same time as by all its other consumers. Too late it reveals its essential poverty, a poverty that inevitably reflects the poverty of its production. Meanwhile, some other object is already replacing it as justification of the system and demanding its own moment of acclaim.*

Spectacular capitalism is not simply a world that lacks development and change; these occur outside of the spectators’ view. As consumers—the seekers of leisure—spectators are mesmerized by constant repetition. We retreat to the realm of consumption while the spectacular world—technology and information—becomes increasingly complex and sophisticated. What grows, develops, and improves is not the consumers of technologies and information, but the spectacle itself. This recalls what Marx says about capitalism.

*...the more the worker produces, the less he has to consume; the more value he creates, the more valueless, the more unworthy he becomes; the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the mightier labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more ingenious labor becomes, the duller becomes the worker.*<sup>386</sup>

Under spectacular capitalism, this predicament pertains not only to laborers but to all, including the masters of labor—the capitalists. The growth of the commodity comes at the expense of human development. In pseudocyclical time people become idiots and cretins, while capital as the spectacle expands and grows stronger. We do not grow as human beings. This situation is similar to the experience of the lord in the *Phenomenology*. The lord is not aware that the world

---

<sup>385</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 71.

<sup>386</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Estranged Labour”, 73.

outside him is constantly changing and fleeting. But because he is obsessed with his own sense of self through his repeated enjoyments, he is oblivious to the changing world. “Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence.”<sup>387</sup> With spectacular capitalism, universal proletarianization also means universal embourgeoisement—we would maintain our own ignorance of this changing reality.

As spectators, dwelling in the realm of consumption, we are ignorant of the intrinsic instability of our own reality. We forget the fact that, even though spectacular capitalism seems permanent, it is an illusion of permanence that is underlined by constant self-repairing. The spectacle is the appearance of a stable structure that is supported by a shaky foundation that is always at the verge of collapse. The logic of the spectacle undermines itself.

*The things the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change. The spectacle is totally dogmatic, yet it is incapable at arriving at any really solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it. This instability is the spectacle's natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination.*<sup>388</sup>

The existence of the spectacle is merely momentary, consisting of nothing but the latest, most up-to-date trends. Accordingly, in the realm of spectacular capitalism, everything is short-lived and nothing is truly long lasting. This is especially true of human relationships, whose duration becomes increasingly fragile. As a result, in order for the spectacle to preserve its longevity, it actually requires constant technological innovations in order to provide new solutions to its ever increasing problems; “the integrated spectacle is characterized by... incessant technological renewal.”<sup>389</sup> Constant technological renewal is necessary to conceal the instability and

---

<sup>387</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118.

<sup>388</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 154.

<sup>389</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 5.

fleetingness of the spectacle. The transition between each short-lived spectacular moment, from one trend to the next, from one latest news to the next, and so on, must be quick and instantaneous. Technology in the form of media makes this possible.

*When social significance is attributed only to what is immediate, and to what will be immediate immediately afterwards, always replacing another, identical, immediacy, it can be seen that the uses of the media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance.*<sup>390</sup>

The more the media is developed the more concealed the transition between each repetition at the rate of “increasing transportation speeds.”<sup>391</sup> The speed from one spectacular moment to the next increases to the point that time can no longer be perceived as a movement that keeps getting faster. What arrives is a pre-constructed package. “In its most advanced sectors, concentrated capitalism is increasingly tending to market “fully equipped” blocks of time, each functioning as a unified commodity combining a variety of other commodities.”<sup>392</sup>

Everything arrives in front of me ready-made, like Netflix movies, YouTube videos. Not just entertainments but any products that would require time to create come to us in no time at all. There cannot be a gap from one moment of gratification to the next. My desires must be met instantaneously and time itself becomes a commodity. “The time based on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity.”<sup>393</sup> Time is a commodity to be purchased and what we are paying for is more illusions of real life. We pay to experience what it feels like to be living rather than actually experiencing life.

*In the expanding economy of “services” and leisure activities, the payment for these blocks of time is equally unified: “everything’s included,” whether it is a matter of spectacular living environments, touristic pseudo-travel, subscriptions to cultural consumption, or even the sale of sociability*

---

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, Section 6.

<sup>391</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 153.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid, Section 152.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid, Section 151.

*itself in the form of “exciting conversations” and “meetings with celebrities.” Spectacular commodities of this type, which would obviously never sell were it not for the increasing impoverishment of the realities they parody, just as obviously reflect the modernization of sales techniques by being payable on credit.*<sup>394</sup>

However, the transition is never quick enough to completely eliminate the irritation of dissatisfaction. Consciousness never actually experiences the feeling of an unalloyed self; the perpetual search for instant gratification always goes along with feelings of agitation, despair, anxiety and restlessness.

*He regards feeling thus...perception thus...volitional formation thus...consciousness thus: ‘This is mine, this I am, this my self.’ That consciousness of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of consciousness, there arise in him sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair.”*<sup>395</sup>

This impatience is the essence of the spectator, who does not see time as change but as consumable. We want our demands to be met immediately and we cannot wait.

This impatience itself provides a clue to how to overcome the spectacle. In its place, patience is the capacity to make and give time for consciousness “to impose its own condition”<sup>396</sup> instead of being drawn into the spectacle. It is the acknowledgment that we make history when we live historically. Once we learn to wait and realize that history happens right where we are, we do not have to chase after the next moment of consumption, getting caught in the endless repetitions of commodified time. Time is a social relation, the lived experience of individuals in movement and not some external commodity waiting to be acquired or even bought.

---

<sup>394</sup> Ibid, Section 152.

<sup>395</sup> Bodhi, *Samyutta Nikaya*, 866.

<sup>396</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 221.

Waiting, for Laozi and Debord, is not simply biding one's time in the expectation that change will come automatically. Patience is precisely the removal of all such expectations and letting change come naturally. Change can only occur when all the conditions are present. Where there is smoke there is fire; the spectacle can only disappear when we ourselves are no longer spectators. The capacity to wait might seem like passivity but it is actually the genuine spirit of revolution. We overcome the spectacle by overcoming our own spectacular tendencies. By changing ourselves, we change our spectacular reality rather than dismissing it.

*Knowing others is wisdom;  
Knowing the self is enlightenment.  
Mastering others requires force;  
Mastering the self needs strength.*

*He who knows he has enough is rich.  
Perseverance is a sign of willpower.  
He who stays where he is endures.  
To die but not to perish is to be eternally present.<sup>397</sup>*

Through patience, we are aware of our own agitation, restlessness, and despair. We begin to realize how fragile and impermanent the system of spectacular capitalism really is. This inherent weakness is easily missed in the midst of incessant grasping, when we try too hard to accomplish and enjoy too many things. In patience we begin our departure from the spectacle by making time to start asking questions about the status of spectacular capitalism and, in turn, our own current way of living. We can then see the spectacle for what it is instead of creating new myths and stories to conceal it. Precisely because it is so fragile, spectacular capitalism must present an image of permanence, and constantly reinforce itself to make sure it does not collapse. We unconsciously become this reinforcement when we chase our desires. The spectacle thrives on the anxiety and restlessness of impatient spectators.

---

<sup>397</sup> Feng, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 33.

As we become aware of the spectacle's hold on our lives, we may become impatient to do away with it. This urge to overcome the spectacle is dangerous because it is not really motivated by rejection of the spectacle. It may be secretly driven by envy of the power of the spectacle. "Spectacular power can similarly deny whatever it likes, once, or three times over, and change the subject, knowing full well there is no danger of any riposte, in its own space or any other."<sup>398</sup> The spectacle was begotten by power; it cannot be overpowered by overt attacks. "The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power."<sup>399</sup> Historically, Marxists fell into this trap. While critical of the power of capital and the state, they sought to wield power themselves.

*A 'Marxist' theory of politics went along with this mechanical view, according to which the individuals who make up the ruling class are determined to defend their interests against those they exploit, and are ready to use violent means where necessary. The state was then said to be 'nothing but' their instrument for this purpose. 'Revolution' simply meant smashing up this instrument, and establishing a new one, just changing the form of state power. 'Socialism', largely identified with state ownership, was the next 'mode of production' on a pre-set historical agenda. The conception of revolution flourishing in Marxist circles thus centred, not on the idea of liberation, but on the concept of power.<sup>400</sup>*

Those who desire spectacular power want to empty the throne of the spectacle only to take its place. In spectacular capitalism, power is wielded by experts, specialists, "academics and media professionals, sociologists and police."<sup>401</sup> They occupy the highest rung of the spectacular hierarchy because they have the authority over everything spectacular. The spectacle speaks for everyone. "It is hierarchical society's ambassador to itself, delivering its messages at a court

---

<sup>398</sup> Debord, *Comment on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 7.

<sup>399</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 23.

<sup>400</sup> Smith, C. (2004) *Karl Marx and the future of the human*. United States: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 46.

<sup>401</sup> Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Section 28.

where no one else is allowed to speak.”<sup>402</sup> However, spectacular reality is never what it seems. “All experts serve the state and the media and only in that way do they achieve their status.”<sup>403</sup>

Within the spectacle, time is no longer seen as the realm of change and growth. Pseudocyclical or commodified time is when change and growth cease. This problem manifests in our relationships with things and people. They become all or nothing. Either things go our way or we react with indifference at best or hostility at worst. We lack the time to observe or listen or have dialogues with others. We never give others enough time for them to open themselves to us. “The primary cause of the decadence of contemporary thought evidently lies in the fact that spectacular discourse leaves no room for any reply.”<sup>404</sup> How can there be reply when there is not enough time for the other to find the words to speak his mind? We already silence others when we are impatient. “Conversation is almost dead, and soon so too will be those who knew how to speak.”<sup>405</sup> This is even more apparent in our efforts to help others. In trying to help without patience, without making and giving time for others, we betray the secret conviction that those we are trying to help cannot really change. We draw a boundary between ourselves as helpers and those who need help. We lack confidence in their ability to help themselves. Such activism, though it styles itself revolutionary, defies Marx’s conviction that the revolution will be the work of the workers themselves. The activist considers himself the representative of the exploited class. He “forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself” and activism “must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one

---

<sup>402</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 23.

<sup>403</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 7.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid, Section 10.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid, Section 10.



of which is superior to society.<sup>406</sup> A covert lust for power may lead to the creation of theories, movements, and sectarian groups.

*'Marxism' was an attempt to set up a philosophical doctrine, a philosophy of history, which would explain how society made transitions from one stage to another. This misunderstanding obscured what was crucial for everything Marx did: the necessity for social consciousness to break out of its existing, fetishised forms to the level necessary for communism. This was not a matter of replacing one way of thinking with another, for it implied what Marx called 'the alteration of humans on a mass scale'. [2] Instead of this understanding of the revolutionary transformation of humanity, 'Marxism' set up a system of thinking which assigns to special people - radical philosophers, or social scientists, or economists, or the Marxist Party - the task of 'interpreting the world in various ways' on behalf of the rest of us. In a quite separate operation, their conclusions could then be communicated to the benighted masses.*<sup>407</sup>

If we cannot be patient with others we cannot be patient with ourselves. Just as we want others to change instantly, we also want ourselves and our circumstances to immediately adjust to our expectations. "We place conditions on ourselves and our experience: "If I feel like this, there must be something wrong with me...I can only accept myself if my experience conforms to my standard of how it should be."<sup>408</sup> An example is when we seek out spiritual practices as guarantees for the quickest change in the shortest amount of time. Such spiritual practices will not only fail to free us from spectacular tendencies, but will only add to them.

*Spiritual practice involves freeing consciousness from its entanglement in form, matter, emotions, personality, and social conditioning. In a society like ours, where the whole earthly foundation is weak to begin with, it is tempting to use spirituality as a way of trying to rise above this shaky ground. In this way, spirituality becomes just another way of rejecting one's experience. When people use spiritual practice to compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the nature of spiritual practice...*

<sup>406</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, "Theses on Feuerbach", 144.

<sup>407</sup> Smith, *Karl Marx and the Future of the Human*, 11.

<sup>408</sup> Welwood, *Toward a psychology of awakening: Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the path of personal and spiritual transformation*, 164.

*Spiritual bypassing is a strong temptation in times like ours when achieving what were once ordinary developmental landmarks—earning a livelihood through dignified, meaningful work; raising a family; sustaining a long-term intimate relationship; belonging to a larger social community—has become increasingly difficult and elusive. Yet when people use spirituality to cover up their difficulties with functioning in the modern world, their spiritual practices remains in a separate compartment, unintegrated with the rest of life*

*...people who hid behind a schizoid defense (resorting to isolation and withdrawal because the interpersonal realm feels threatening) often use teachings about detachment and renunciation to rationalize their aloofness, impersonality, and disengagement, when what they really need is to become more fully embodied, more engaged with themselves, with others, and with life.<sup>409</sup>*

Patience not only exposes the weakness of spectacular capitalism; it is the basis for growth and change—our path to reclaim history and time.

*“People who strive continuously /  
will certainly attain what they seek.  
Having attained the benefits they sought, /  
practicing patience is supreme.”<sup>410</sup>*

We restore the natural flow of time from commodified blocks of time to real living moments of individuals.

*The revolutionary project of a classless society, of an all-embracing historical life, implies the withering away of the social measurement of time in favor of a federation of independent times — a federation of playful individual and collective forms of irreversible time that are simultaneously present. This would be the temporal realization of authentic communism, which “abolishes everything that exists independently of individuals.”<sup>411</sup>*

This sense of being present is not derived from getting what we want immediately but the immediacy of being present with living. We make time to develop relationships that are beneficial to our development and growth. On the one hand, with patience, we understand how

<sup>409</sup> Ibid, 207-209.

<sup>410</sup> Sutta Central: Samyukta āgama (2) 50. <https://suttacentral.net/en/sa-2.50>.

<sup>411</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Section 163.

unnatural it is to demand that things be immediate and instantaneous. When time is commodified, as repetitive and pseudocyclical, real change is impossible in this unnatural and illusory realm of permanence. The spectacle changes but the spectators do not.

*The unavoidable biological limitations of the work force — evident both in its dependence on the natural cycle of sleeping and waking and in the debilitating effects of irreversible time over each individual's lifetime — are treated by the modern production system as strictly secondary considerations. As such, they are ignored in that system's official proclamations and in the consumable trophies that embody its relentless triumphant progress. Fixated on the delusory center around which his world seems to move, the spectator no longer experiences life as a journey toward fulfillment and toward death. Once he has given up on really living, he can no longer acknowledge his own death. Life insurance ads merely insinuate that he may be guilty of dying without having provided for the smooth continuation of the system following the resultant economic loss, while the promoters of the "American way of death" stress his capacity to preserve most of the appearances of life in his post-mortem state. On all the other fronts of advertising bombardment it is strictly forbidden to grow old. Everybody is urged to economize on their "youth-capital," though such capital, however carefully managed, has little prospect of attaining the durable and cumulative properties of financial capital. This social absence of death coincides with the social absence of life.<sup>412</sup>*

On the other hand, with patience we also begin to see how natural growth and change actually occur. The *I-Ching* observes that actual change and growth unfold themselves slowly and gradually rather than instantly.

*A family that accumulates goodness will be sure to have an excess of blessing, but one that accumulates evil will be sure to have an excess of disasters. When a subject kills his lord or a son kills his father, it is never because of what happens between the morning and evening of the same day but because of something that has been building up for a long time and that should have been dealt with early—but it was not.<sup>413</sup>*

Therefore, real work and real change cannot happen instantaneously but must take time. Without this awareness we would retreat back to spectacular capitalism and the struggle for

---

<sup>412</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 160.

<sup>413</sup> Lynn, *I-Ching*, 146.

power promising the instant gratification of quick results. Quick results are illusory since they are not our own doing. Shortcuts and quick results are defining features of the society of the spectacle.

*The image of blissful social unification through consumption merely postpones the consumer's awareness of the actual divisions until his next disillusionment with some particular commodity. Each new product is ceremoniously acclaimed as a unique creation offering a dramatic shortcut to the promised land of total consummation.*<sup>414</sup>

So the only way we can escape spectacular capitalism while not resorting to “illusory escapes”<sup>415</sup> is to resist the temptation of demanding immediate results. Quick solutions come to us, as Debord says, ready-made, reflecting our craving for commodified, pseudocyclical time. Even the desire to rapidly abolish and destroy the enemy, within spectacular capitalism, only makes it stronger. The thought of an enemy is the product of our own paranoia and delusion which leads society as a whole to construct “its own inconceivable foe, terrorism.”<sup>416</sup> This paranoiac mistrust fails to see that the worst enemies are ourselves—humans acting inhumanly towards one another. As the spectacle develops, it is easier for us to think that we are surrounded by unknown enemies and that we are living in a terrifying world. “The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic.”<sup>417</sup> This is only another myth to reestablish ourselves as spectators instead of realizing that we have no true human enemies at all.

When we stop seeing people as enemies, the goal of overcoming spectacular capitalism is not to eliminate or convert anyone. We cannot force anyone else to change or be different; when

---

<sup>414</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 69.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid, Section 218.

<sup>416</sup> Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Section 9.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid, Section 9.

we ourselves have not changed the ways in which we act and when we force others to act that is not real change. “We surely know today, and should have known before, that nobody can be forced to be free, or driven to become human. To think otherwise is to have a distorted notion of what it means to be human.”<sup>418</sup> The distorted notion here is thinking that people can change instantly. Hence, for Marx, the communist revolution, or simply working towards a human community, is not something that can be accomplished overnight.

*Clearly, Marx does not consider revolution as a sudden overnight transformation, resulting from some kind of coup d'état, however violent it might be. He refers to the situation following a prolonged historical transition, when 'in the course of development class distinctions have disappeared and all production has been concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation.' [504] Then, he anticipates, 'the public power will lose its political character'. The proletariat will have 'abolished its own supremacy as a class. In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' [506]*<sup>419</sup>

Like the social transition into communism, for the Buddha, the individual's path towards enlightenment is a journey that goes beyond one lifetime. It is a journey that spans uncountable lifetimes and forms. It is a movement that is infinite, and culminates in the boundless.

*'And he, with mind concentrated...applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of previous existences: one birth, two, three, four, five births, ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty births, a hundred, a thousand, a hundred thousand births, several periods of contraction, of expansion, of both contraction and expansion. "There my name was so-and-so, my clan was so-and-so, my caste was so-and-so, my food was such-and-such, I experienced such-and-such pleasant and painful conditions, I lived for so long. Having passed away from there, I rose there. There my name was so-and-so...And having passed away from there, I arose here."*<sup>420</sup>

---

<sup>418</sup> Smith, *Marx at the Millennium*, 73.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>420</sup> Walshe, *Digha Nikaya*, 106.

It is not an infinity of one-sided repetitions or one-sided change on the side of spectacular capitalism. Rather, it is an infinity of change on both the side of consciousness and the world. And it is this infinity that Hegel calls true or genuine infinity.

*True infinity taken thus generally as determinate being which is posited as affirmative in contrast to the abstract negation, is reality in a higher sense than the former reality which was simply determinate; for here it has acquired a concrete content.*<sup>421</sup>

One who glibly passes judgement experiences reality as determinate, but in so doing negates the work of consciousness, which consists in patiently tarrying with the actual issue.

*For instead of getting involved in the real issue, this kind of activity is always away beyond it; instead of tarrying with it, and losing itself in it, this kind of knowing is forever grasping at something new; it remains essentially preoccupied with itself instead of being preoccupied with the real issue and surrendering to it. To judge a thing that has substance and solid worth is quite easy, to comprehend it is much harder, and to blend judgment and comprehension in a definitive description is the hardest thing of all.*<sup>422</sup>

Such is the activity of the spectator watching history unfold; he is not a historical being participating in the concrete world.

Change is not an autonomous, isolated self-movement. It begins with work, where consciousness and history mutually transform and relate to one another. Life then is no longer the realm of alienation and desire, the madness of fleeting moments. History is no longer a mere accident that happens to consciousness, and the relationships between consciousness and the world mere correlations. Who we are and the state of the world is the result of creative activity or work. With work, real change arises out of true infinity as real permanence.

---

<sup>421</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 149.

<sup>422</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 2-3.

*Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off...The negative relation to the object becomes its form and something permanent.*<sup>423</sup>

This is the permanence of creation, as the self-creation of consciousness through its relations with others. It is work raised to the level of infinity as a lifelong activity—as the return of humans to their natural being as a social species.

*This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man...*<sup>424</sup>

And it is through this naturalism, work as natural activity, that we achieve permanence in the second sense—permanence as liberation and freedom or, for Marx, communism.

*...the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.*<sup>425</sup>

In the end, the solution to the riddle is always there, naturally within each and every individual. “Because this substantiality is immediate, it implies the aspect of *naturalness*, of organic vitality. To this extent the idea is the universal in the form of species.”<sup>426</sup> Therefore, the most radical revolution is not a broad, spectacular sweep on the surface with the goal of a fresh start and beginning everything anew. Rather, it is to look at the foundation. The most radical task is rarely entertained because the solution is deep within us, something that we possess all along. Naturalism is neither the desire to return to a specific part of history—the good old days—nor a rejection of history itself as a return to pre-history. Naturalism means a return to a natural and communal way of living that we know is possible.

---

<sup>423</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>424</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Private Property and Communism”, 82.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>426</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on natural right*, 139.

*In a society increasingly based upon self-interest, how can anybody take 'the standpoint of socialised humanity'? Somehow, amidst all the corruption and fragmentation of the modern world, we have remained – not much, not always, generally unknown to ourselves and with many mistakes and distortions – human. At the back of our minds, we still know it.*

*If this were not the case, there could be no language, no science, no philosophy, no politics, no poetry, no love. These activities – twisted and perverted, organically entangled in their inhuman wrapping as they are – still do exist. That tells us that humanity does indeed survive, but bound up with, and hidden by, its direct opposite, in forms which simultaneously give us this message of humanity and deny it.<sup>427</sup>*

All it takes is patience to actualize this human potential. We do not need the added pressures of being new, innovative, and original. To do things differently does not require finding novel and ground breaking solutions. It involves understanding who we are and what we are doing. To focus on innovation only complicates matters. “At the very time when we need to speak as plainly as we can to each other and to ourselves, leading thinkers are determined to wrap their pronouncements in the most obscure language they can devise.”<sup>428</sup> Innovations may be harmful not because they have no benefits but because they distract from and conceal the real issue.

*Technological innovation has a long history, and is an essential component of capitalist society, sometimes described as industrial or post-industrial. But since its most recent acceleration (in the aftermath of the Second World War) it has greatly reinforced spectacular authority, by surrendering everybody to the mercy of specialists, to their calculations and to the judgments which always depend on them.<sup>429</sup>*

The Buddha's teachings are valuable not necessarily because of their originality but their practicality.

*'Excellent, Lord, excellent! It is as if someone were to set up what had been knocked down, or to point out the way to one who had got lost, or to bring*

---

<sup>427</sup> Smith, *Marx at the Millennium*, 73.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>429</sup> Debord, *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 5.



*an oil-lamp into a dark place, so those with eyes could see what was there.*<sup>430</sup>

The lamp of enlightenment and the eyes to see have always been there. All we have to do is lift our eyes and walk forward, slowly but surely, towards the goal. The Buddha, like Laozi, Hegel, and Marx, are not asking us to attempt anything beyond our ability. They are not pointing to impossible problems that require impossible solutions.

*Is a free, united, self-governing association only possible for gods, as Rousseau thought? Is the task of emancipation too hard for mere mortals? Marx's conception of history is the key to an answer to these questions: 'Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.' [2] Humans have themselves unconsciously made this inhuman world, and have now reached the stage where, on the basis of past conquests, they can and must consciously remake it. That is how freedom, which is the essence of humanity, emerges into the open and the nightmare of our prehistory gives way to our real, conscious, human history.*<sup>431</sup>

The path towards realization of our human potential is difficult but, once we acknowledge it, to be human is actually easier than we make it out to be. Teachers helping students, parents taking care of their children, friends being kind to friends, engagement in dialogue are some ways of realizing who we can be as humans. The most complicated problems may have simple solutions.

*In the universe the difficult things are done as if they are easy.  
In the universe great acts are made up of small deeds.  
The sage does not attempt anything very big,  
And thus achieved greatness.*<sup>432</sup>

The goal of emancipation is not something for consciousness to anxiously await. Looking ahead, the path is always long and difficult and it seems consciousness “is like a prisoner who laboriously files the bars of his window.”<sup>433</sup> The real measure of progress is not how close we are

---

<sup>430</sup> Walshe, *Digha Nikaya*, 108.

<sup>431</sup> Smith, *Karl Marx and the Future of the Human*, 144.

<sup>432</sup> Feng, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 63.

<sup>433</sup> Benoit, *Zen and the psychology of transformation: The supreme doctrine*, 31.

to the goal. The prisoner “is not free little by little; he is not free at all for some time.”<sup>434</sup> It is only when he looks back that he can tell himself, “You have found yourself now; from the very beginning nothing has been hidden from you; it was yourself who shut your eyes to reality.”<sup>435</sup> The riddle of humanity that hung over us for so long and kept us bound in suffering evaporates instantaneously, as awareness “bursts forth like a volcanic eruption or explodes like a clap of thunder.”<sup>436</sup> At this moment the condition of our inverted world heading towards self-destruction is itself inverted. This sudden liberation is not a spectacular escape which promises instant liberty at the price of infinite submission. The liberation of Nibbana, Absolute Knowing, Communism or the Tao can only arise out of infinite work which may bring unexpected emancipation. “At a single stroke I have completely crushed the cave of phantoms.”<sup>437</sup> Thus Hegel says, “Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what truly is,”<sup>438</sup> but that end “presupposes...its beginning.”<sup>439</sup> Emancipation ultimately is neither a looking ahead nor a looking behind. It is liberation at every single moment, the equanimous overcoming of suffering right where we are. At the moment of realization, the end is the beginning, when one no longer clings to the past nor anxiously anticipates the future.

*“This is deliverance!”, and he knows: “Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.”*<sup>440</sup>

---

<sup>434</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>436</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>438</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 11.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>440</sup> Walkse, *Digha Nikaya*, 107-108.

## **Conclusion**

The title of the thesis is the Work of Emancipation and the Emancipation of Work; I chose work as the central topic of my paper is because of the ubiquity of the term. Regardless of our opinions on goodness, justice, beauty or the religious and philosophical beliefs that we hold, work, as we call it--employment or wage-labor—is an unquestioned reality for all of us. There is a reason for this. As Marx says in “Wage Labor and Capital,” the worker “works in order to live.”<sup>441</sup> It is obvious that we work to make a living and a career is a crucial benchmark to be achieved. Work is an inevitable part of life. But even then we have not gotten to the real importance of work because to equate work with what we think of as employment is to see it merely as part of a checklist, a burden that limits us.

But work is not limiting. It is freeing and liberating. It is not the freedom of sellers and buyers in commodity exchange or the freedom of selling oneself on the market as a free-laborer for a wage. Rather, it is creative freedom. As Marx says in the Appendix of Capital Vol.1, “Work is the eternal natural condition of human existence. The process of labor is nothing but work itself, viewed at the moment of its creative activity.”<sup>442</sup> This creative activity is free in the sense that, as workers, we are capable of conceiving the possibilities of how the world could be and actualizing those possibilities. The world that we create, in turn, defines who we are. That is the basis of work. However, in practice, we run into a contradiction.

On the one hand, work can be seen as the activity of building a community or work as service. For Hegel, when work is considered as the discipline of service, we go beyond our “self-

---

<sup>441</sup> Tucker, R. C. (1978) *Tucker Marx-Engels reader 2ed (cloth)*. 2nd edn. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 204.

<sup>442</sup> Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 990.

centered attitude” and through it we “extend to the known real world of existence.”<sup>443</sup> With communal work, fundamentally, we understand that, “men not only act on nature but also on one another.”<sup>444</sup> This is work understood positively or concretely. The goals of communal work are also positive and concrete. When building a community, we are not aiming for a utopia or a paradise on earth. What we are looking for is simply “the earnestness of life in its concrete richness” and “this leads the way to an experience of the real issue.”<sup>445</sup> Concerns such as forming better relationships with people and nature, improved social conditions, etc. will be at the forefront of work and we can achieve those goals not because each of us is left alone of our own accord but because we work together in order to create a better world. Communal work is described in the Tao Te Ching, where the worker “never tries to store things. The more he does for others, the more he has. The more he gives to others, the greater is his abundance.”<sup>446</sup> Since work is our natural condition, the task of bringing about a community does not belong only to politics, academics, or activists. It is the capacity of every single person while doing the best that they can to be kind, compassionate and, overall, more human to one another.

But, on the other hand, work can be seen as an intensification of our alienated and isolated existence. As Marx says, “If the silk worm were to spin in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage-worker.”<sup>447</sup> However, we never escape the cocoon but the more we become immersed in alienated or wage-labor we only reinforce the cocoon that we have surrounded ourselves with. This cocoon comes in many different forms such as wages, commodities, representations and images. They grant us the illusion of living life while keeping

---

<sup>443</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 119.

<sup>444</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 207.

<sup>445</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 3.

<sup>446</sup> Feng, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 81.

<sup>447</sup> Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, “Wage Labour and Capital”, 205.

us from actually being part of it. We no longer find freedom and liberation in creative activities. In today's world, "life begins...where this activity ceases."<sup>448</sup> Life is not about living, the world is not something we create, but it is something that is given. "The twelve hours' labor...has no meaning for him [the worker] as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc., but as earnings, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed."<sup>449</sup> This creates a separation between us and the real source of our identity and individuality which is each other. Modern production is dedicated to maintaining this separation by strengthening the cocoon which culminates in what Debord calls the spectacle. "In all of its particular manifestations — news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment — the spectacle is the *model* of the prevailing way of life."<sup>450</sup> The world of the spectacle is the inverse or the upside-down world of community. "In a world that has really been turned upside down, the true is a moment of the false."<sup>451</sup> It is the world occupied not by actively living human beings but by passive and lifeless spectators.

Between the two kinds of life, between the community and the spectacle, just by looking around us, we can tell that we have chosen the society of the spectacle as our universal reality. However, the possibility of a communal life still exists but, nonetheless, forgotten. With that in mind, before we can say with certainty that what we need is community, two questions need to be addressed. The first question is, why should we assume that communal life is better than spectacular life? It seems that we are doing fine and the world is better than ever before. While that may seem true, it is only because the spectacle specializes in appearances. "Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is an affirmation of appearances and an identification of all human

---

<sup>448</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid, 205.

<sup>450</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Section 6.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid, Section 9.

social life with appearances.”<sup>452</sup> The spectacle poses as the epitome and the end of history, as what human life is meant to be. It appears invulnerable and infallible, free from challenges and alternatives. “The spectacle is the ruling order’s nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise, its self-portrait at the stage of totalitarian domination of all aspects of life.”<sup>453</sup> Because of that the spectacle is able to conceal the fact that its nature is self-defeating. Unlike the community which is positive and concrete, the spectacle is always negative. The spectacle is on the side of abstraction, dissolution and self-destruction. Underneath the façade of stability and supremacy, the spectacle runs the risk of undermining its own existence. “The things the spectacle presents as eternal are based on change, and must change as their foundations change. The spectacle is totally dogmatic, yet it is incapable of arriving at any really solid dogma. Nothing stands still for it. This instability is the spectacle’s natural condition, but it is completely contrary to its natural inclination.”<sup>454</sup> Overall, the inherent fragility and weakness of the spectacle reflects the fact that we, as the producer of the spectacle, are also, like moths to a flame, heading towards our own destruction the more we produce and reproduce the spectacle. “Workers do not produce themselves; they produce a power independent of themselves. The success of this production, the abundance it generates, is experienced by the producers as an abundance of dispossession. As their alienated products accumulate, all time and space become foreign to them.”<sup>455</sup> As a result, “The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.”<sup>456</sup> In other words, by remaining within the society of the spectacle, we deprive ourselves of our own being.

---

<sup>452</sup> Ibid, Section 10.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid, Section 24.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid, Section 154.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid, Section 31.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid, Section 30.

If we were to acknowledge the self-destructiveness of the spectacular life, the next question then is how do we overcome the spectacle and reestablish communal life? Despite our effort of trying to break away from a counterfeit life, the main problem is we think that to overcome the spectacle is to be outside of it and in the process we think that community is something outside of us. Consequently, we either think that the communal life is but a dream, a result of wishful thinking and naïve optimism or we hold to the view that the notion of true community can only be understood and realized by a select few (Hegelians, Zen Buddhists, Marxists, etc.). With the latter approach instead of, as Hegel puts it, “looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it,”<sup>457</sup> we find “find a way of creating an impression of hard work and serious commitment to the problem, while actually sparing [ourselves] both.”<sup>458</sup> We want change by neglect what we are already doing and find a certain fixed ideology or cause we can identify ourselves with. Change begins right where we are, at every single living moment. It is not about bringing revolution into our life but seeing that life is already the foundation of revolution. Therefore, even a small act of humanity, such as making time to have a meaningful dialogue, is already a moment of non-spectacular relation and in that moment we are already free from the spectacle. It is a moment of reclaiming or, to be more accurate, of remembering, in place of forgetting, our natural communal being and actualizing it through patience and hard work.

---

<sup>457</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 19.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

## Bibliography

Benoit, H. and Huxley, A. (1990) *Zen and the psychology of transformation: The supreme doctrine*. United States: Inner Traditions Bear and Company.

Bodhi, B. (2000) *Connected discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, U.S.

Bodhi, B. (2005) *In the Buddha's words: An anthology of discourses from the Pali canon*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, U.S.

Chen, E.M., Zi, L., Tzu, L., Lao-Tzu, E.C.M., Laozi, L.Z. and Laozi (1989) *The Tao Te Ching: A New Translation With Commentary*. 1st edn. New York: Paragon House Publishers.

Debord, G. (2013) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Edited by Ken Knabb. United States: Bureau of Public Secrets, U.S.

Debord, G. and Imrie, M. (2010) *Comments on the society of the spectacle*. 3rd edn. London: Verso Books.

Descartes, R. and Cress, D.A. (1993) *Discourse on method ; and, meditations on first philosophy*. 3rd edn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co.

Eck, D.L. (1998) *Darśan: Seeing the divine image in India*. 3rd edn. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gabel, J., Thompson, M.A., with the assistance of Kenneth A. Thompson and introd. by Kenneth A. Thompson (1975) *False consciousness: An essay on Reification*. New York: Harper & Row Barnes & Noble Import Division.

Hanh, T.N. and Neumann, R. (2006) *Understanding our mind: Fifty verses on Buddhist psychology*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.

Hegel, G.W.F., Miller, A.V. and Findlay, J.N. (1979) *Phenomenology of Spirit (Galaxy Books)*. 1st edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA.

Hegel, G.W.F., Wannenmann, P., Hodgson, P.C., the staff of the Hegel Archives, with an introduction by Otto Pöggeler and translated by J. Michael Stewart (1996) *Lectures on natural right and political science: The First philosophy of right*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hegel, G.W.F.W.F., Knox, T.M., Houlgate, S. and Gethin, R. (2008) *Outlines of the philosophy of right*. Edited by Oxford University Press Staff. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kant, I. (1999) *Critique of pure reason*. Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kant, I. and Ellington, J.W. (1993) *Grounding for the metaphysics of morals ; with, on a supposed right to lie because of philanthropic concerns*. 3rd edn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.



Laozi, Tsu, L., Feng, G.-F., English, J. and Tzu, L. (1972) *Tao te ching*. 3rd edn. New York: Vintage Books.

Lynn, R.J. and Bi, W. (1994) *The classic of changes: A new translation of the I Ching as interpreted by Wang bi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Marx, K. (1992) *Early Writings (Penguin Classics)*. United Kingdom: Penguin Group (USA).

Marx, K., Mandel, E. and Fowkes, B. (1990) *Capital: A critique of political economy: V. 1: A critique of political economy*. New York, NY: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review.

Marx, K., Milligan, M., Communist, the, Engels, F. and Rosenbaum, S.E. (1988) *The economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 and the communist manifesto (great books in philosophy)*. Edited by Robert M. Baird. United States: Prometheus Books.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1986) *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected works: [their essential thinking in philosophy, political economy, history, social change and communism]*. New York: International Publishers Co.

Marx, K. and Nicolaus, M. (1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. New York: New York, Vintage Books [1973].

Marx, K. (no date) *Reflections of a Young Man on The Choice of a Profession*. Available at: <http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/PhilTexts/Marx/www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1837-pre/marx/1835-ref.htm> (Accessed: 16 January 2016).

Miller, A.V., Findlay, J.N., Hegel, G.W.F. and Friedrich, W. (1991) *Hegel's 'science of logic'*. United States: Prometheus Books.

Pail, the, Ñāṇamoli, B., Bodhi, B., Bhikkhu, B. and Nanamoli, B. (1995) *The middle length discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Majjhima Nikaya (teachings of the Buddha)*. 2nd edn. Boston: Wisdom Publications in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies.

Saks, E.R. (2008) *The center cannot hold: My journey through madness*. New York: Hyperion.

Smith, C. (1996) *Marx at the millennium*. United Kingdom: Pluto Press.

Smith, C. (2004) *Karl Marx and the future of the human*. United States: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

Solomon, A. (2015) *The Noonday demon: An Atlas of depression*. United States: Scribner Book Company.

Tucker, R.C. (1978) *Tucker Marx-Engels reader 2ed (cloth)*. 2nd edn. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Walshe, M. (1995) *The long discourses of the Buddha: A translation of the Digha Nikaya (teachings of the Buddha)*. 2nd edn. Boston: Wisdom Publications, U.S.

Welwood, J. (2002) *Toward a psychology of awakening: Buddhism, psychotherapy, and the path of personal and spiritual transformation*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.